

"No."

"It's against the law!"

"Yes."

"This is a national emergency! You have no right to any private secrets! You're withholding vital information! I'm the President of this railroad! I'm ordering you to tell me! You can't refuse to obey an order! It's a penitentiary offense! Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you refuse?"

"I do."

Years of training had made Taggart able to watch any audience around him, without appearing to do so. He saw the tight, closed faces of the staff, faces that were not his allies. All had a look of despair, except the face of Eddie Willers. The "feudal serf" of Taggart Transcontinental was the only one who seemed untouched by the disaster. He looked at Taggart with the lifelessly conscientious glance of a scholar confronted by a field of knowledge he had never wanted to study.

"Do you realize that you're a traitor?" yelled Taggart.

Eddie asked quietly, "To whom?"

"To the people! It's treason to shield a deserter! It's economic treason! Your duty to feed the people comes first, above anything else whatever! Every public authority has said so! Don't you know it? Don't you know what they'll do to you?"

"Don't you see that I don't give a damn about that?"

"Oh, you don't? I'll quote that to the Unification Board! I have all these witnesses to prove that you said—"

"Don't bother about witnesses, Jim. Don't put them on the spot. I'll write down everything I said. I'll sign it, and you can take it to the Board."

The sudden explosion of Taggart's voice sounded as if he had been slapped: "Who are you to stand against the government? Who are you, you miserable little office rat, to judge national policies and hold opinions of your own? Do you think the country has time to bother about your opinions, your wishes or your precious little conscience? You're going to learn a lesson—all of you!—all of you spoiled, self-indulgent, undisciplined little two-bit clerks, who strut as if that crap about your rights was serious! You're going to learn that these are not the days of Nat Taggart!"

Eddie said nothing. For an instant, they stood looking at each other across the desk. Taggart's face was distorted by terror. Eddie's remained sternly serene. James Taggart believed the existence of an Eddie Willers too well; Eddie Willers could not believe the existence of a James Taggart.

"Do you think the nation will bother about your wishes or hers?" screamed Taggart. "It's her duty to come back! It's her duty to work! What do we care whether she wants to work or not? We need her!"

"Do you, Jim?"

An impulse pertaining to self-preservation made Taggart back a step away from the sound of that particular tone, a very quiet tone, in the voice of Eddie Willers. But Eddie made no move to follow.

He remained standing behind his desk, in a manner suggesting the civilized tradition of a business office.

"You won't find her," he said. "She won't be back. I'm glad she won't. You can starve, you can close the railroad, you can throw me in jail, you can have me shot—what does it matter? I won't tell you where she is. If I see the whole country crashing, I won't tell you. You won't find her. You—"

They whirled at the sound of the entrance door flung open. They saw Dagny standing on the threshold.

She wore a wrinkled cotton dress, and her hair was disheveled by hours of driving. She stopped for the duration of a glance around her, as if to recapture the place, but there was no recognition of persons in her eyes, the glance merely swept through the room, as if making a swift inventory of physical objects. Her face was not the face they remembered; it had aged, not by means of lines, but by means of a still, naked look stripped of any quality save ruthlessness.

Yet their first response, ahead of shock or wonder, was a single emotion that went through the room like a gasp of relief. It was in all their faces but one; Eddie Willers, who alone had been calm a moment ago, collapsed with his face down on his desk; he made no sound, but the movements of his shoulders were sobs.

Her face gave no sign of acknowledgment to anyone, no greeting, as if her presence here were inevitable and no words were necessary. She went straight to the door of her office; passing the desk of her secretary, she said, her voice like the sound of a business machine, neither rude nor gentle, "Ask Eddie to come in."

James Taggart was the first one to move, as if dreading to let her out of his sight. He rushed in after her, he cried, "I couldn't help it!" and then, life returning to him, his own, his normal kind of life, he screamed. "It was *your* fault! You did it! You're to blame for it! Because you left!"

He wondered whether his scream had been an illusion inside his own ears. Her face remained blank; yet she had turned to him; she looked as if sounds had reached her, but not words, not the communication of a mind. What he felt for a moment was his closest approach to a sense of his own non-existence.

Then he saw the faintest change in her face, merely the indication of perceiving a human presence, but she was looking past him and he turned and saw that Eddie Willers had entered the office.

There were traces of tears in Eddie's eyes, but he made no attempt to hide them. He stood straight, as if the tears or any embarrassment or any apology for them were as irrelevant to him as to her.

She said, "Get Ryan on the telephone, tell him I'm here, then let me speak to him." Ryan had been the general manager of the railroad's Central Region.

Eddie gave her a warning by not answering at once, then said, his voice as even as hers, "Ryan's gone, Dagny. He quit last week."

They did not notice Taggart, as they did not notice the furniture around them. She had not granted him even the recognition of ordering him out of her office. Like a paralytic, uncertain of his muscles' obedience, he gathered his strength and slipped out. But he was