

his head lifted, the manuscript of the speech held crumpled in his fingers. It looked like a walk to mount either a pedestal or a guillotine. As the whole of a man's life flashes before him in his dying moment, so he walked to the sound of the announcer's voice reading to the country the list of Robert Stadler's achievements and career. A faint convulsion ran over Robert Stadler's face at the words: "—former head of the Department of Physics of the Patrick Henry University." He knew, distantly, not as if the knowledge were within him, but as if it were within some person he was leaving behind, that the crowd was about to witness an act of destruction more terrible than the destruction of the farm.

He had mounted the first three steps of the scaffold, when a young newsman tore forward, ran to him and, from below, seized the railing to stop him. "Dr. Stadler!" he cried in a desperate whisper. "Tell them the truth! Tell them that you had nothing to do with it! Tell them what sort of infernal machine it is and for what purpose it's intended to be used! Tell the country what sort of people are trying to rule it! Nobody can doubt your word! Tell them the truth! Save us! You're the only one who can!"

Dr. Stadler looked down at him. He was young; his movements and voice had that swift, sharp clarity which belongs to competence; among his aged, corrupt, favor-ridden and pull-created colleagues, he had managed to achieve the rank of elite of the political press, by means and in the role of a last, irresistible spark of ability. His eyes had the look of an eager, unfrightened intelligence; they were the kind of eyes Dr. Stadler had seen looking up at him from the benches of classrooms. He noticed that this boy's eyes were hazel; they had a tinge of green.

Dr. Stadler turned his head and saw that Ferris had come rushing to his side, like a servant or a jailer. "I do not expect to be insulted by disloyal young punks with treasonable motives," said Dr. Stadler loudly.

Dr. Ferris whirled upon the young man and snapped, his face out of control, distorted by rage at the unexpected and unplanned, "Give me your press card and your work permit!"

"I am proud," Dr. Stadler read into the microphone and into the attentive silence of a nation, "that my years of work in the service of science have brought me the honor of placing into the hands of our great leader, Mr. Thompson, a new instrument with an incalculable potential for a civilizing and liberating influence upon the mind of man. . . ."

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The sky had the stagnant breath of a furnace and the streets of New York were like pipes running, not with air and light, but with melted dust. Dagny stood on a street corner, where the airport bus had left her, looking at the city in passive astonishment. The buildings seemed worn by weeks of summer heat, but the people seemed worn by centuries of anguish. She stood watching them, disarmed by an enormous sense of unreality.

That sense of unreality had been her only feeling since the early hours of the morning—since the moment when, at the end of an

empty highway, she had walked into an unknown town and stopped the first passer-by to ask where she was.

"Watsonville," he answered. "What state, please?" she asked. The man glanced at her, said, "Nebraska," and walked hastily away. She smiled mirthlessly, knowing that he wondered where she had come from and that no explanation he could imagine would be as fantastic as the truth. Yet it was Watsonville that seemed fantastic to her, as she walked through its streets to the railroad station. She had lost the habit of observing despair as the normal and dominant aspect of human existence, so normal as to become unnoticed—and the sight of it struck her in all of its senseless futility. She was seeing the brand of pain and fear on the faces of people, and the look of evasion that refuses to know it—they seemed to be going through the motions of some enormous pretense, acting out a ritual to ward off reality, letting the earth remain unseen and their lives un-lived, in dread of something namelessly forbidden—yet the forbidden was the simple act of looking at the nature of their pain and questioning their duty to bear it. She was seeing it so clearly that she kept wanting to approach strangers, to shake them, to laugh in their faces and to cry, "Snap out of it!"

There was no reason for people to be as unhappy as that, she thought, no reason whatever . . . and then she remembered that reason was the one power they had banished from their existence.

She boarded a Taggart train for the nearest airfield; she did not identify herself to anyone: it seemed irrelevant. She sat at the window of a coach, like a stranger who has to learn the incomprehensible language of those around her. She picked up a discarded newspaper; she managed, with effort, to understand what was written, but not why it should ever have been written: it all seemed so childishly senseless. She stared in astonishment at a paragraph in a syndicated column from New York, which stated overemphatically that Mr. James Taggart wished it to be known that his sister had died in an airplane crash, any unpatriotic rumors to the contrary notwithstanding. Slowly, she remembered Directive 10-289 and realized that Jim was embarrassed by the public suspicion that she had vanished as a deserter.

The wording of the paragraph suggested that her disappearance had been a prominent public issue, not yet dropped. There were other suggestions of it: a mention of Miss Taggart's tragic death, in a story about the growing number of plane crashes—and, on the back page, an ad, offering a \$100,000 reward to the person who would find the wreckage of her plane, signed by Henry Rearden.

The last gave her a stab of urgency; the rest seemed meaningless. Then, slowly, she realized that her return was a public event which would be taken as big news. She felt a lethargic weariness at the prospect of a dramatic homecoming, of facing Jim and the press, of witnessing the excitement. She wished they would get it over with in her absence.

At the airfield, she saw a small-town reporter interviewing some departing officials. She waited till he had finished, then she approached him, extended her credentials and said quietly, to the gap-