It was only the breach of one wire, but it produced a short circuit in the interlocking traffic system, and the signals of motion or danger disappeared from the panels of the control towers and from among the strands of rail. The red and green lenses remained red and green, not with the living radiance of sight, but with the dead stare of glass eyes. On the edge of the city, a cluster of trains gathered at the entrance to the Terminal tunnels and grew through the minutes of stillness, like blood damned by a clot inside a vein, unable to rush into the chambers of the heart.

Dagny, that night, was sitting at a table in a private dining room of the Wayne-Falkland. The wax of candles was dripping down on the white camellia and laurel leaves at the base of the silver candlesticks, arithmetical calculations were penciled on the damask linen tablecloth, and a cigar butt was swimming in a finger bowl. The six men in formal dinner jackets, facing her about the table, were Wesley Mouch, Eugene Lawson, Dr. Floyd Ferris, Clem Weatherby, James Taggart and Cuffy Meigs.

"Why?" she had asked, when Jim had told her that she had to attend that dinner. "Well . . . because our Board of Directors is to meet next week." "And?" "You're interested in what's going to be decided about our Minnesota Line, aren't you?" "Is that going to be decided at the Board meeting?" "Well, not exactly." "Is it going to be decided at this dinner?" "Not exactly, but . . . oh, why do you always have to be so definite? Nothing's ever definite. Besides, they insisted that they wanted you to come." "Why?" "Isn't that sufficient?"

She did not ask why those men chose to make all their crucial decisions at parties of this kind; she knew that they did. She knew that behind the clattering, lumbering pretense of their council sessions, committee meetings and mass debates, the decisions were made in advance, in furtive informality, at luncheons, dinners and bars, the graver the issue, the more casual the method of settling it. It was the first time that they had asked her, the outsider, the enemy, to one of those secret sessions; it was, she thought, an acknowledgment of the fact that they needed her and, perhaps the first step of their surrender; it was a chance she could not leave untaken.

But as she sat in the candlelight of the dining room, she felt certain that she had no chance, she felt restlessly unable to accept that certainty, since she could not grasp its reason, yet lethargically reluctant to pursue any inquiry.

"As, I think, you will concede, Miss Taggart, there now seems to be no economic justification for the continued existence of a railroad line in Minnesota, which . . ." "And even Miss Taggart will, I'm sure, agree that certain temporary retrenchments seem to be indicated, until . . ." "Nobody, not even Miss Taggart, will deny that there are times when it is necessary to sacrifice the parts for the sake of the whole . . ." As she listened to the mentions of her name tossed into the conversation at half-hour intervals, tossed perfunctorily, with the speaker's eyes never glancing in her direction, she wondered what motive had made them want her to be present. It was not an attempt to delude her into believing that they were consulting her,

but worse: an attempt to delude themselves into believing that she had agreed. They asked her questions at times and interrupted her before she had completed the first sentence of the answer. They seemed to want her approval, without having to know whether she approved or not.

Some crudely childish form of self-deception had made them choose to give to this occasion the decorous setting of a formal dinner. They acted as if they hoped to gain, from the objects of gracious luxury, the power and the honor of which those objects had once been the product and symbol—they acted, she thought, like those savages who devour the corpse of an adversary in the hope of acquiring his strength and his virtue.

She regretted that she was dressed as she was. "It's formal," Jim had told her, "but don't overdo it . . . what I mean is, don't look too rich . . . business people should avoid any appearance of arrogance these days . . . not that you should look shabby, but if you could just seem to suggest . . . well, humility . . . it would please them, you know, it would make them feel big." "Really?" she had said, turning away.

She wore a black dress that looked as if it were no more than a piece of cloth crossed over her breasts and falling to her feet in the soft folds of a Grecian tunic; it was made of satin, a satin so light and thin that it could have served as the stuff of a nightgown. The luster of the cloth, streaming and shifting with her movements, made it look as if the light of the room she entered were her personal property, sensitively obedient to the motions of her body, wrapping her in a sheet of radiance more luxurious than the texture of brocade, underscoring the pliant fragility of her figure, giving her an air of so natural an elegance that it could afford to be scornfully casual. She wore a single piece of jewelry, a diamond clip at the edge of the black neckline, that kept flashing with the imperceptible motion of her breath, like a transformer converting a flicker into fire, making one conscious, not of the gems, but the living heat behind them; it flashed like a military decoration, like wealth worn as a badge of honor. She wore no other ornament, only the sweep of a black velvet cape, more arrogantly, ostentatiously patrician than any spread of sables.

She regretted it now, as she looked at the men before her; she felt the embarrassing guilt of pointlessness, as if she had tried to defy the figures in a waxworks. She saw a mindless resentment in their eyes and a sneaking trace of the lifeless, sexless, smutty leer with which men look at a poster advertising burlesque.

"It's a great responsibility," said Eugene Lawson, "to hold the decision of life or death over thousands of people and to sacrifice them when necessary, but we must have the courage to do it." His soft lips seemed to twist into a smile.

"The only factors to consider are land acreage and population figures," said Dr. Ferris in a statistical voice, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling. "Since it is no longer possible to maintain both the Minnesota Line and the transcontinental traffic of this railroad, the choice is between Minnesota and those states west of the Rockies which were cut off by the failure of the Taggart Tunnel, as well as