

"Hugh Akston?" she stammered. "The philosopher? . . . The last of the advocates of reason?"

"Why, yes," he answered pleasantly. "Or the first of their return."

He did not seem startled by her shock, but he seemed to find it unnecessary. His manner was simple, almost friendly, as if he felt no need to hide his identity and no resentment at its being discovered.

"I didn't think that any young person would recognize my name or attach any significance to it, nowadays," he said.

"But . . . but what are you doing here?" Her arm swept at the room. "This doesn't make sense!"

"Are you sure?"

"What is it? A stunt? An experiment? A secret mission? Are you studying something for some special purpose?"

"No, Miss Taggart. I'm earning my living." The words and the voice had the genuine simplicity of truth.

"Dr. Akston, I . . . it's inconceivable, it's . . . You're . . . you're a philosopher . . . the greatest philosopher living . . . an immortal name . . . why would *you* do *this*?"

"Because I am a philosopher, Miss Taggart."

She knew with certainty—even though she felt as if her capacity for certainty and for understanding were gone—that she would obtain no help from him, that questions were useless, that he would give her no explanation; neither of the inventor's fate nor of his own.

"Give it up, Miss Taggart," he said quietly, as if giving proof that he could guess her thoughts, as she had known he would. "It is a hopeless quest, the more hopeless because you have no inkling of what an impossible task you have chosen to undertake. I would like to spare you the strain of trying to devise some argument, trick or plea that would make me give you the information you are seeking. Take my word for it: it can't be done. You said I'm the end of your trail. It's a blind alley, Miss Taggart. Do not attempt to waste your money and effort on other, more conventional methods of inquiry: do not hire detectives. They will learn nothing. You may choose to ignore my warning, but I think that you are a person of high intelligence, able to know that I know what I am saying. Give it up. The secret you are trying to solve involves something greater—much greater—than the invention of a motor run by atmospheric electricity. There is only one helpful suggestion that I can give you: By the essence and nature of existence, contradictions cannot exist. If you find it inconceivable that an invention of genius should be abandoned among ruins, and that a philosopher should wish to work as a cook in a diner—check your premises. You will find that one of them is wrong."

She started: she remembered that she had heard this before and that it was Francisco who had said it. And then she remembered that this man had been one of Francisco's teachers.

"As you wish, Dr. Akston," she said. "I won't attempt to question you about it. But would you permit me to ask you a question on an entirely different subject?"

"Certainly."

"Dr. Robert Stadler once told me that when you were at the Patrick Henry University, you had three students who were your favorites

and his, three brilliant minds from whom you expected a great future. One of them was Francisco d'Anconia."

"Yes. Another was Ragnar Danneskjöld."

"Incidentally—this is not my question—who was the third?"

"His name would mean nothing to you. He is not famous."

"Dr. Stadler said that you and he were rivals over these three students, because you both regarded them as your sons."

"Rivals? *He* lost them."

"Tell me, are you proud of the way these three have turned out?"

He looked off, into the distance, at the dying fire of the sunset on the farthest rocks; his face had the look of a father who watches his sons bleeding on a battlefield. He answered:

"More proud than I had ever hoped to be."

It was almost dark. He turned sharply, took a package of cigarettes from his pocket, pulled out one cigarette, but stopped, remembering her presence, as if he had forgotten it for a moment, and extended the package to her. She took a cigarette and he struck the brief flare of a match, then shook it out, leaving only two small points of fire in the darkness of a glass room and of miles of mountains beyond it.

She rose, paid her bill, and said, "Thank you, Dr. Akston. I will not molest you with tricks or pleas. I will not hire detectives. But I think I should tell you that I will not give up. I must find the inventor of that motor. I will find him."

"Not until the day when he chooses to find *you*—as he will."

When she walked to her car, he switched on the lights in the diner, she saw the mailbox by the side of the road and noted the incredible fact that the name "Hugh Akston" stood written openly across it.

She had driven far down the winding road, and the lights of the diner were long since out of sight, when she noticed that she was enjoying the taste of the cigarette he had given her: it was different from any she had ever smoked before. She held the small remnant to the light of the dashboard, looking for the name of the brand. There was no name, only a trademark. Stamped in gold on the thin, white paper there stood the sign of the dollar.

She examined it curiously: she had never heard of that brand before. Then she remembered the old man at the cigar stand of the Taggart Terminal, and smiled, thinking that this was a specimen for his collection. She stamped out the fire and dropped the butt into her handbag.

Train Number 57 was lined along the track, ready to leave for Wyatt Junction, when she reached Cheyenne, left her car at the garage where she had rented it, and walked out on the platform of the Taggart station. She had half an hour to wait for the east-bound main liner to New York. She walked to the end of the platform and leaned wearily against a lamppost; she did not want to be seen and recognized by the station employees, she did not want to talk to anyone, she needed rest. A few people stood in clusters on the half-deserted platform; animated conversations seemed to be going on, and newspapers were more prominently in evidence than usual.

She looked at the lighted windows of Train Number 57—for a moment's relief in the sight of a victorious achievement. Train Number 57 was about to start down the track of the John Galt Line, through