"Have you any idea what I had to know in order to make it possible? You couldn't think of a single tube of it! Not a single bolt!"

Meigs shrugged. "Maybe not."

"Then how dare you think that you can own it? How dare you come here? What claim do you have to it?"

Meigs patted his holster. "*This.*"

"Listen, you drunken lout!" cried Dr. Stadler. "Do you know what you're playing with?"

"Don't you talk to me like that, you old fool! Who are *you* to talk to me like that? I can break your neck with my bare hands! Don't you know who I am?"

"You're a scared thug way out of his depth!"

"Oh, I am, am I? I'm the Boss! I'm the Boss and I'm not going to be stopped by an old scarecrow like you! Get out of here!"

They stood staring at each other for a moment, by the panel of the Xylophone, both cornered by terror. The unadmitted root of Dr. Stadler's terror was his frantic struggle not to acknowledge that he was looking at his final product, that *this* was his spiritual son. Cuffy Meigs' terror had wider roots, it embraced all of existence; he had lived in chronic terror all his life, but now he was struggling not to acknowledge what it was that he had dreaded: in the moment of his triumph, when he expected to be safe, that mysterious, occult breed—the intellectual—was refusing to fear him and defying his power.

"Get out of here!" snarled Cuffy Meigs. "I'll call my men! I'll have you shot!"

"Get out of here, you lousy, brainless, swaggering moron!" snarled Dr. Stadler. "Do you think I'll let you cash in on *my* life? Do you think it's for *you* that I . . . that I sold—" He did not finish. "Stop touching those levers. God damn you!"

"Don't you give me orders! I don't need you to tell me what to do! You're not going to scare me with your classy mumbo-jumbo! I'll do as I please! What did I fight for, if I can't do as I please?" He chuckled and reached for a lever.

"Hey, Cuffy, take it easy!" yelled some figure in the back of the room, darting forward.

"Stand back!" roared Cuffy Meigs. "Stand back, all of you! Scared, am I? I'll show you who's boss!"

Dr. Stadler leaped to stop him—but Meigs shoved him aside with one arm, gave a gulp of laughter at the sight of Stadler falling to the floor, and, with the other arm, yanked a lever of the Xylophone.

The crash of sound—the screeching crash of ripped metal and of pressures colliding on conflicting circuits, the sound of a monster turning upon itself—was heard only inside the structure. No sound was heard outside. Outside, the structure merely rose into the air, suddenly and silently, cracked open into a few large pieces, shot some hissing streaks of blue light to the sky and came down as a pile of rubble. Within the circle of a radius of a hundred miles, enclosing parts of four states, telegraph poles fell like matchsticks, farmhouses collapsed into chips, city buildings went down as if slashed and minced by a single second's blow, with no time for a

sound to be heard by the twisted bodies of the victims—and, on the circle's periphery, halfway across the Mississippi, the engine and the first six cars of a passenger train flew as a shower of metal into the water of the river, along with the western spans of the Taggart Bridge, cut in half.

On the site of what had once been Project X, nothing remained alive among the ruins—except, for some endless minutes longer, a huddle of torn flesh and screaming pain that had once been a great mind.

* *

There was a sense of weightless freedom—thought Dagny—in the feeling that a telephone booth was her only immediate, absolute goal, with no concern for any of the goals of the passers-by in the streets around her. It did not make her feel estranged from the city: it made her feel, for the first time, that she owned the city and that she loved it, that she had never loved it before as she did in this moment, with so personal, solemn and confident a sense of possession. The night was still and clear; she looked at the sky; as her feeling was more solemn than joyous, but held the sense of a future joy—so the air was more windless than warm, but held the hint of a distant spring

Get the hell out of my way—she thought, not with resentment, but almost with amusement, with a sense of detachment and deliverance, addressing it to the passers-by, to the traffic when it impeded her hurried progress, and to any fear she had known in the past. It was less than an hour ago that she had heard him utter that sentence, and his voice still seemed to ring in the air of the streets, merging into a distant hint of laughter

She had laughed exultantly, in the ballroom of the Wayne-Falkland, when she had heard him say it; she had laughed, her hand pressed to her mouth, so that the laughter was only in her eyes—and in his, when he had looked straight at her and she had known that he heard it. They had looked at each other for the span of a second, above the heads of the gasping, screaming crowd—above the crash of the microphones being shattered, though all stations had been instantly cut off—above the bursts of breaking glass on falling tables, as some people were stampeding to the doors.

Then she had heard Mr. Thompson cry, waving his arm at Galt, "Take him back to his room, but guard him with your lives!"—and the crowd had parted as three men led him out. Mr. Thompson seemed to collapse for a moment, dropping his forehead on his arm, but he rallied, jumped to his feet, waved vaguely at his henchmen to follow and rushed out, through a private side exit. No one addressed or instructed the guests: some were running blindly to escape, others sat still, not daring to move. The ballroom was like a ship without a captain. She cut through the crowd and followed the clique. No one tried to stop her.

She found them huddled in a small private study: Mr. Thompson was slumped in an armchair, clutching his head with both hands, Wesley Mouch was moaning, Eugene Lawson was sobbing with the sound of a nasty child's rage, Jim was watching the others with an