

Chapter II THE CHAIN

It began with a few lights. As a train of the Taggart line rolled toward Philadelphia, a few brilliant, scattered lights appeared in the darkness; they seemed purposeless in the empty plain, yet too powerful to have no purpose. The passengers watched them idly, without interest.

The black shape of a structure came next, barely visible against the sky, then a big building, close to the tracks; the building was dark, and the reflections of the train lights streaked across the solid glass of its walls.

An oncoming freight train hid the view, filling the windows with a rushing smear of noise. In a sudden break above the flat cars, the passengers saw distant structures under a faint, reddish glow in the sky; the glow moved in irregular spasms, as if the structures were breathing.

When the freight train vanished, they saw angular buildings wrapped in coils of steam. The rays of a few strong lights cut straight sheafs through the coils. The steam was red as the sky.

The thing that came next did not look like a building, but like a shell of checkered glass enclosing girders, cranes and trusses in a solid, blinding, orange spread of flame.

The passengers could not grasp the complexity of what seemed to be a city stretched for miles, active without sign of human presence. They saw towers that looked like contorted skyscrapers, bridges hanging in mid-air, and sudden wounds spurting fire from out of solid walls. They saw a line of glowing cylinders moving through the night; the cylinders were red-hot metal.

An office building appeared, close to the tracks. The big neon sign on its roof lighted the interiors of the coaches as they went by. It said: REARDEN STEEL.

A passenger, who was a professor of economics, remarked to his companion: "Of what importance is an individual in the titanic collective achievements of our industrial age?" Another, who was a journalist, made a note for future use in his column: "Hank Rearden is the kind of man who sticks his name on everything he touches. You may, from this, form your own opinion about the character of Hank Rearden."

The train was speeding on into the darkness when a red gasp shot to the sky from behind a long structure. The passengers paid no attention; one more heat of steel being poured was not an event they had been taught to notice.

It was the first heat for the first order of Rearden Metal.

To the men at the tap-hole of the furnace inside the mills, the first break of the liquid metal into the open came as a shocking sensation of morning. The narrow streak pouring through space had the pure white color of sunlight. Black coils of steam were boiling upward, streaked with violent red. Fountains of sparks shot in beating spasms,

as from broken arteries. The air seemed torn to rags, reflecting a raging flame that was not there, red blotches whirling and running through space, as if not to be contained within a man-made structure, as if about to consume the columns, the girders, the bridges of cranes overhead. But the liquid metal had no aspect of violence. It was a long white curve with the texture of satin and the friendly radiance of a smile. It flowed obediently through a spout of clay, with two brittle borders to restrain it, it fell through twenty feet of space, down into a ladle that held two hundred tons. A flow of stars hung above the stream, leaping out of its placid smoothness, looking delicate as lace and innocent as children's sparklers. Only at a closer glance could one notice that the white satin was boiling. Splashes flew out at times and fell to the ground below: they were metal and, cooling while hitting the soil, they burst into flame.

Two hundred tons of metal which was to be harder than steel, running liquid at a temperature of four thousand degrees, had the power to annihilate every wall of the structure and every one of the men who worked by the stream. But every inch of its course, every pound of its pressure and the content of every molecule within it, were controlled and made by a conscious intention that had worked upon it for ten years.

Swinging through the darkness of the shed, the red glare kept slashing the face of a man who stood in a distant corner; he stood leaning against a column, watching. The glare cut a moment's wedge across his eyes, which had the color and quality of pale blue ice—then across the black web of the metal column and the ash-blond strands of his hair—then across the belt of his trenchcoat and the pockets where he held his hands. His body was tall and gaunt; he had always been too tall for those around him. His face was cut by prominent cheekbones and by a few sharp lines; they were not the lines of age, he had always had them; this had made him look old at twenty, and young now, at forty-five. Ever since he could remember, he had been told that his face was ugly, because it was unyielding, and cruel, because it was expressionless. It remained expressionless now, as he looked at the metal. He was Hank Rearden.

The metal came rising to the top of the ladle and went running over with arrogant prodigality. Then the blinding white trickles turned to glowing brown, and in one more instant they were black icicles of metal, starting to crumble off. The slag was crusting in thick, brown ridges that looked like the crust of the earth. As the crust grew thicker, a few craters broke open, with the white liquid still boiling within.

A man came riding through the air, in the cab of a crane overhead. He pulled a lever by the casual movement of one hand: steel hooks came down on a chain, seized the handles of the ladle, lifted it smoothly like a bucket of milk—and two hundred tons of metal went sailing through space toward a row of molds waiting to be filled.

Hank Rearden leaned back, closing his eyes. He felt the column trembling with the rumble of the crane. The job was done, he thought.