held paralyzed by a newspaper spread on his desk with a long column of directives on the front page—he had heard on the radio the news of Ellis Wyatt's flaming oil fields. Then, his first reaction—before any thought of the future, any sense of disaster, any shock, terror or protest—had been to burst out laughing. He had laughed in triumph, in deliverance, in a spurting, living exultation—and the words which he had not pronounced, but felt, were: God bless you, Ellis, whatever you're doing!

When he had grasped the implications of his laughter, he had known that he was now condemned to constant vigilance against himself. Like the survivor of a heart attack, he knew that he had had a warning and that he carried within him a danger that could strike him at any moment.

He had held it off, since then. He had kept an even, cautious, severely controlled pace in his inner steps. But it had come close to him for a moment, once again. When he had looked at the order of the State Science Institute on his desk, it had seemed to him that the glow moving over the paper did not come from the furnaces outside, but from the flames of a burning oil field.

"Mr Rearden," said the Wet Nurse, when he heard about the rejected order, "you shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?"

"There's going to be trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"It's a government order. You can't reject a government order."

"Why can't I?"

"It's an Essential Need project, and secret, too. It's very important."

"What kind of a project is it?"

"I don't know. It's secret."

"Then how do you know it's important?"

"It said so."

"Who said so?"

"You can't doubt such a thing as that, Mr. Rearden!"

"Why can't I?"

"But you can't."

"If I can't, then that would make it an absolute and you said there aren't any absolutes."

"That's different."

"How is it different?"

"It's the government."

"You mean, there aren't any absolutes except the government?"

"I mean, if they say it's important, then it is."

"Why?"

"I don't want you to get in trouble, Mr. Rearden, and you're going to, sure as hell. You ask too many why's. Now why do you do that?"

Rearden glanced at him and chuckled. The boy noticed his own words and grinned sheepishly, but he looked unhappy.

The man who came to see Rearden a week later was youngish and slenderish, but neither as young nor as slender as he tried to make himself appear. He wore civilian clothes and the feather leg-

gings of a traffic cop. Rearden could not quite get it clear whether he came from the State Science Institute or from Washington.

"I understand that you refused to sell metal to the State Science Institute, Mr. Rearden," he said in a soft, confidential tone of voice.

"That's right," said Rearden.

"But wouldn't that constitute a willful disobedience of the law?"

"It's for you to interpret."

"May I ask your reason?"

"My reason is of no interest to you."

"Oh, but of course it is! We are not your enemies, Mr. Rearden. We want to be fair to you. You mustn't be afraid of the fact that you are a big industrialist. We won't hold it against you. We actually want to be as fair to you as to the lowest day laborer. We would like to know your reason."

"Print my refusal in the newspapers, and any reader will tell you my reason. It appeared in all the newspapers a little over a year ago."

"Oh, no, no, no! Why talk of newspapers? Can't we settle this as a friendly, private matter?"

"That's up to you."

"We don't want this in the newspapers."

"No?"

"No. We wouldn't want to hurt you."

Rearden glanced at him and asked, "Why does the State Science Institute need ten thousand tons of metal? What is Project X?"

"Oh, that? It's a very important project of scientific research, an undertaking of great social value that may prove of inestimable public benefit, but, unfortunately, the regulations of top policy do not permit me to tell you its nature in fuller detail."

"You know," said Rearden, "I could tell you—as my reason—that I do not wish to sell my Metal to those whose purpose is kept secret from me. I created that Metal. It is my moral responsibility to know for what purpose I permit it to be used."

"Oh, but you don't have to worry about that, Mr. Rearden! We relieve you of the responsibility."

"Suppose I don't wish to be relieved of it?"

"But . . . but that is an old-fashioned and . . . and purely theoretical attitude."

"I said I could name it as my reason. But I won't—because, in this case, I have another, inclusive reason. I would not sell any Rearden Metal to the State Science Institute for any purpose whatever, good or bad, secret or open."

"But why?"

"Listen," said Rearden slowly, "there might be some sort of justification for the savage societies in which a man had to expect that enemies could murder him at any moment and had to defend himself as best he could. But there can be no justification for a society in which a man is expected to manufacture the weapons for his own murderers."

"I don't think it's advisable to use such words, Mr. Rearden. I don't think it's practical to think in such terms. After all, the government cannot—in the pursuit of wide, national policies—take