man there by the name of Peters . . . from the Unification Board . . . he's a stooge of Tinky Holloway . . . who's a stooge of Orren Boyle . . . What they wanted from me was . . . they wanted me to sign a lot of passes . . . to let some of the goons in . . . so they'd start trouble from the inside and the outside together . . . to make it look like they really were your workers . . . I refused to sign the passes."

"You did? After they'd let you in on their game?"

"But . . . but, of course, Mr. Rearden . . . Did you think I'd play *that kind* of game?"

"No, kid, no, I guess not. Only—"

"What?"

"Only that's when you stuck your neck out."

"But I had to! . . . I couldn't help them wreck the mills, could I? . . . How long was I to keep from sticking my neck out? Till they broke yours? . . . And what would I do with my neck, if that's how I had to keep it? . . . You . . . , you understand it, don't you, Mr. Rearden?"

"Yes, I do."

"I refused them . . . I ran out of the office . . . I ran to look for the superintendent . . . to tell him everything . . . but I couldn't find him . . . and then I heard shots at the main gate and I knew it had started . . . I tried to phone your home . . . the phone wires were cut . . . I ran to get my car, I wanted to reach you or a policeman or a newspaper or somebody . . . but they must have been following me . . . that's when they shot me . . . in the parking lot . . . from behind . . . all I remember is falling and . . . and then, when I opened my eyes, they had dumped me here . . . on the slag heap . . ."

"On the slag heap?" said Rearden slowly, knowing that the heap was a hundred feet below.

The boy nodded, pointing vaguely down into the darkness. "Yeah . . . down there . . . And then I . . . I started crawling . . . crawling up . . . I wanted . . . I wanted to last till I told somebody who'd tell you." The pain-twisted lines of his face smoothed suddenly into a smile; his voice had the sound of a lifetime's triumph as he added, "I have." Then he jerked his head up and asked, in the tone of a child's astonishment at a sudden discovery, "Mr. Rearden, is this how it feels to . . . to want something very much . . . very desperately much . . . and to make it?"

"Yes, kid, that's how it feels." The boy's head dropped back against Rearden's arm, the eyes closing, the mouth relaxing, as if to hold a moment's profound contentment. "But you can't stop there. You're not through. You've got to hang on till I get you to a doctor and- -" He was lifting the boy cautiously, but a convulsion of pain ran through the boy's face, his mouth twisting to stop a cry—and Rearden had to lower him gently back to the ground.

The boy shook his head with a glance that was almost apology. "I won't make it, Mr. Rearden . . . No use fooling myself . . . I know I'm through."

Then, as if by some dim recoil against self-pity, he added, reciting a memorized lesson, his voice a desperate attempt at his old, cynical,

intellectual tone, "What does it matter, Mr. Rearden? . . . Man is only a collection of . . . conditioned chemicals . . . and a man's dying doesn't make . . . any more difference than an animal's."

"You know better than that."

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I guess I do."

His eyes wandered over the vast darkness, then rose to Rearden's face; the eyes were helpless, longing, childishly bewildered. "I know . . . it's crap, all those things they taught us . . . all of it, everything they said . . . about living or . . . or dying . . . Dying . . . it wouldn't make any difference to chemicals, but—" he stopped, and all of his desperate protest was only in the intensity of his voice dropping lower to say, "—but it does, to me . . . And . . . and, I guess, it makes a difference to an animal, too . . . But they said there are no values . . . only social customs . . . No values!" His hand clutched blindly at the hole in his chest, as if trying to hold that which he was losing. "No . . . values . . ."

Then his eyes opened wider, with the sudden calm of full frankness. "I'd like to live, Mr. Rearden. God, how I'd like to!" His voice was passionately quiet. "Not because I'm dying . . . but because I've just discovered it tonight, what it means, really to be alive . . . And . . . it's funny . . . do you know when I discovered it? . . . In the office . . . when I stuck my neck out . . . when I told the bastards to go to hell . . . There's . . . there's so many things I wish I'd known sooner . . . But . . . well, it's no use crying over spilled milk." He saw Rearden's involuntary glance at the flattened trail below and added, "Over spilled anything, Mr. Rearden."

"Listen, kid," said Rearden sternly, "I want you to do me a favor."

"*Now*, Mr. Rearden?"

"Yes. Now."

"Why, of course, Mr. Rearden . . . if I can."

"You've done me a big favor tonight, but I want you to do a still bigger one. You've done a great job, climbing out of that slag heap. Now will you try for something still harder? You were willing to die to save my mills. Will you try to live for me?"

"For *you*, Mr. Rearden?"

"For me. Because I'm asking you to. Because I want you to. Because we still have a great distance to climb together, you and I."

"Does it . . . does it make a difference to *you*, Mr. Rearden?"

"It does. Will you make up your mind that you want to live just as you did down there on the slag heap? That you want to last and live? Will you fight for it? You wanted to fight my battle. Will you fight this one with me, as our first?"

He felt the clutching of the boy's hand: it conveyed the violent eagerness of the answer; the voice was only a whisper. "I'll try, Mr. Rearden."

"Now help me to get you to a doctor. Just relax, take it easy and let me lift you."

"Yes, Mr. Rearden." With the jerk of a sudden effort, the boy pulled himself up to lean on an elbow.

"Take it easy, Tony."

He saw a sudden flicker in the boy's face, an attempt at his old, bright, impudent grin. "Not 'Non-Absolute' any more?"

"No, not any more. You're a full absolute now, and you know it."

"Yes. I know several of them, now. There's one"—he pointed at the wound in his chest—"that's an absolute, isn't it? And"—he went on speaking while Rearden was lifting him from the ground by imperceptible seconds and inches, speaking as if the trembling intensity of his words were serving as an anesthetic against the pain—"and men can't live . . . if rotten bastards . . . like the ones in Washington . . . get away with things like . . . like the one they're doing tonight . . . if everything becomes a stinking fake . . and nothing is real . . . and nobody is anybody . . . men can't live that way . . . *that's* an absolute, isn't it?"

"Yes, Tony, that's an absolute."

Rearden rose to his feet by a long, cautious effort; he saw the tortured spasm of the boy's features, as he settled him slowly against his chest, like a baby held tight in his arms—but the spasm twisted into another echo of the impudent grin, and the boy asked, "Who's the Wet Nurse now?"

"I guess I am."

He took the first steps up the slant of crumbling soil, his body tensed to the task of shock absorber for his fragile burden, to the task of maintaining a steady progression where there was no foothold to find.

The boy's head dropped on Rearden's shoulder, hesitantly, almost as if this were a presumption. Rearden bent down and pressed his lips to the dust-streaked forehead.

The boy jerked back, raising his head with a shock of incredulous, indignant astonishment. "Do you know what you did?" he whispered, as if unable to believe that it was meant for him.

"Put your head down," said Rearden, "and I'll do it again."

The boy's head dropped and Rearden kissed his forehead; it was like a father's recognition granted to a son's battle.

The boy lay still, his face hidden, his hands clutching Rearden's shoulders. Then, with no hint of sound, with only the sudden beat of faint, spaced, rhythmic shudders to show it, Rearden knew that the boy was crying—crying in surrender, in admission of all the things which he could not put into the words he had never found.

Rearden went on moving slowly upward, step by groping step, fighting for firmness of motion against the weeds, the drifts of dust, the chunks of scrap metal, the refuse of a distant age. He went on, toward the line where the red glow of his mills marked the edge of the pit above him, his movement a fierce struggle that had to take the form of a gentle, unhurried flow.

He heard no sobs, but he felt the rhythmic shudders, and, through the cloth of his shirt, in place of tears, he felt the small, warm, liquid spurts flung from the wound by the shudders. He knew that the tight pressure of his arms was the only answer which the boy was now able to hear and understand—and he held the trembling body as if the strength of his arms could transfuse some part of his living power into the arteries beating ever fainter against him.