

ONE

*... After eliminating what was no longer human, it is possible to give a new direction to technological development - a direction that shall lead it back to the real needs of man, and that also means: to the actual size of man...
The next step would be to remove what was not sufficiently human, and finally nothing would be spared except what fitted a certain ideal concept of humanity...*

Erik Hart sensed movement and his eyes snapped open. He found himself in a moving vehicle, with his body covered by a lightweight flannel blanket. Erik sat up, forcing the blanket falling at his waist and he shuddered slightly from the cool early morning air that blew in from the open side passenger window.

Looking around, Erik noticed he rest in the backseat of a roomy coupe sedan and realized he wore a simple navy jumpsuit and white canvas shoes with no socks.

Two men wearing white lab coats over casual business dress occupied the front driver and passenger seats. The driver, with combed forward mid-length medium brown hair and thick sideburns adjusted the rearview mirror with a trembling hand.

Erik noticed the worried gray eyes staring back at him and he glanced aside at the right-hand side mirror at the passenger who had shoulder-length sandy hair, horseshoe-style mustache and pale violet eyes.

“It’s Hernando and Suber,” Erik mused and turned his gaze out the window. He saw they were on a lone stretch of two-lane road, entering a wooded area.

Gazing skyward, Erik observed the sun slowly rising in the far eastern horizon, casting the dull gray atmosphere with pale pinks, oranges, and yellows tingeing the edges. At the surface level, the maples, oaks, and pines came closer together as the developments of the city became sparser and turned into vast emptiness, filled with prairie grass and ragweed.

“I really need to get out of here,” Hernando grumbled. “It’s been three hours since my last cigarette!”

Suber grunted in return and withdrew a steno pad and pen from the glove compartment. “I don’t advocate unhealthy habits,” he answered and leaned forward in his seat, scribbling his pen across the page.

“Screw you and your damn habits,” Hernando spat. “Drive the damn car!”

Suber gave a mischievous grin as his pen continued scratching at the pad. “Haven’t you heard that I’m notorious for pulling over during a drive to write whenever inspiration strikes?” he teased and paused momentarily, flipping the page then continued writing.

“Get a tape recorder for fuck’s sake!” Hernando protested. “Please, Suber, take over. If I don’t get a smoke in, I’ll vomit!”

“So vomit.”

Hernando reached into his front pocket with a free hand and Suber swiftly whacked him across the knuckles with his pad. Erik stifled a laugh in response when Hernando shook his fist at Suber.

“What the hell?” Hernando fussed.

“You’re better focused when you force your nervous energies into driving,” Suber said sternly. “Besides, it’s smart and it keeps us all alive!”

“Where are we going?” Erik finally asked once Hernando made a sharp turn, dodging striking another car that came perilously close to the road’s striped median.

“Damn drunkard!” Hernando grumbled as he quickly swerved, avoiding the low valley on the side of the road.

“Watch it, Hernando!” Suber yelled when his pad went sailing out the window. “Stop the car!”

“No!” Hernando pressed the accelerator and hunched forward.

“Fine, stop the car and you can have two cigarettes!”

“Make it three!”

“All right!”

Hernando slowed the car, and then pulled over on the curbside after braking. He idled the engine, waiting as Suber wildly unbuckled his seatbelt and yanked open the door. Suber rushed out, running down the shoulder.

“*Se lo merece!*” Hernando muttered and he shut off the engine then rolled down the driver’s side window.

“Where are you taking me this early in the morning?” Erik asked as Hernando leaned forward, tapping the car lighter.

“We’re taking you to The Center,” Hernando replied and

withdrew a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

“What is that place and why do you have to take me there?” Erik demanded. “Isn’t Mister Greenfield worried about me?”

“Right now, he couldn’t be worried about anything,” Hernando said flatly, tapping the pack gently against the dashboard. Forcing a filtered tip appearing at the package’s top, he put it to his lips, pulling the box away then set it back in his pocket.

“What are you saying?” Erik cried, gripping the edge of the seat.

“Number Three, listen, it’s all very complicated right now,” Hernando replied irritably and tapped his fingers along the steering wheel, waiting for the lighter to turn completely red. “You have to go to that place for a while for treatment and as for what it is, it’s like a rehabilitation center.”

“What are you trying to restore?” Erik spat, unbelieving. “I’m fine, thank you!”

Hernando shook his head, unable to answer and the lighter clicked, popping out after its underside turned red. Extracting it, he placed the glowing metal to the tip of his cigarette, burning away the paper and expelled harsh smoke. Hernando inhaled deeply, shutting his eyes as he leaned back into the seat. He let out a heavy sigh in relief, blowing smoke through his nose.

“I can’t really tell you, Number Three,” Hernando said softly and set the lighter aside on the dashboard. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re not sorry at all,” Erik grumbled.

“What else do you want from me?”

Erik grunted and sat back in his seat, glaring at the man who continued smoking in silence. After Hernando finished one

cigarette, he tossed away the lone tip out the window and pulled out another in the same ritualistic fashion.

“Why wouldn’t he be worried?” Erik snapped. “Is it because his job’s ended and he’s no longer needed, like I am?”

Hernando looked back at Erik, stunned. “What are you trying to say?” he yelled. “Nobody’s getting rid of you!”

“Then give me a straight answer!”

Hernando grunted and ignored Erik as he resumed smoking. Suber approached moments later with his pad and opened the door.

“Let’s get going,” Suber said, tossing his pad on the seat.

“After I finish,” Hernando grumbled. “You promised me three, remember?”

“How many he’s had so far?”

“You’re asking me?” Erik spat. “Why should I care?”

“I’ll just drive this metal box into a ditch,” Hernando muttered, restarting the car. “Let it blow up. Hell, it’ll save us both and that nut-job Corbin the expenses!”

“Corbin?” Erik yelled and kicked the back of the seat. “Let me out of here!” he shrilled. “You’re trying to kill me!”

“No, wait!”

Erik punched the back of Hernando’s head then slugged Suber in the chest when grabbed for. Suber fell back on the ground and Erik cried out when pain erupted behind his eyes. He clutched his head, doubling over.

“*¿Qué pasa?*” Hernando asked, glancing at Erik through the rearview mirror.

Erik moaned and his vision flashed red. He cringed, hearing another voice, dark and sinister talking over him.

You're not doing so well, are you?

"I'm not sick!" Erik cried. "I'm not!"

They're waiting for orders...

They're going to destroy you, erase you, bury you...

You can't plead with those monsters; you can't reason with them...

With no witnesses...

"Hey, hey!" Hernando yelled, turning in his seat. "Why are you freaking out?" Erik screamed and Hernando grabbed Erik by the shoulders, shaking him. "Calm down!"

"Let go of me!" Erik shrieked and pulled away from Hernando's grip. "I'm not letting you kill me!" Erik clamored over the seat and jumped out the car, dropping onto the ground below.

Rolling to his feet, Erik faced Suber who blocked his path, holding a cellular phone.

"What's the matter?" Suber asked. "We're not the bad guys here."

Erik backed away and Hernando immediately got out the car.

"What's your issue?" Hernando shouted.

Erik picked up a rock and hurled it at Suber, striking him across the face. Suber let out a yelp and staggered back, stunned. Erik bolted in the opposite direction, taking off into the forested valley below.

"Shit!" Hernando yowled and gave chase.

Erik crashed through branches and tore through shrubbery, trying to make his escape. He pulled away the overgrown greenery and halted when he approached the edge of a ravine,

looking down at rocky canyon below.

Backing away, some of the loosened rocks gave beneath Erik's weight, falling beneath him and he let out a yelp as he slipped. Striking the ground, Erik struggled keeping his footing and scrambled back, only kicking up more dust and stones.

Hernando approached moments later, panting hard for breath. His eyes widened and he made a mad grab for Erik, pulling at his sleeve. "Stop moving!" Hernando cried. "Don't move!" Erik froze, gasping weakly as Hernando dug in his heels. "Easy, easy..." Hernando crouched low and took a hesitant step rearward, then tightened his grip around Erik's wrist.

"Let me go," Erik pleaded. "You're trying to kill me anyway, right?"

"No," Hernando snapped. "We're trying to keep you alive!"

"I don't believe you!"

"I'm not letting you go. If you kill yourself, I'm coming with you."

Erik looked up, appalled. "Why?" he cried.

"Because I promised someone."

"Hey," Suber's voice called from above. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Hernando called back. "We're barely hanging on over here!"

"I got a rope! Hold tight!"

"Who did you promise?" Erik demanded.

"Genovera!"

Erik paled and felt his control slipping as he suddenly grew weak.

"Hey!" Hernando yelled. "Hey, hey, don't go out on me now!" Hernando yanked Erik back from the edge to more stable

ground. Suber came down moments later, taking careful steps as he held a rope in his hands.

“Come on,” Suber called. “I don’t know how long that tree’s going to hold!”

“Shit, shit, shit!” Hernando hissed, grabbing the slack end Suber threw to him and pulled against it, while dragging Erik up with him.

Suber also grabbed a hold of Erik’s other arm, helping him up. Dragging Erik to a level area, Suber crouched beside him as Hernando plopped on the ground, drained.

“You all right?” Suber asked and waved a hand in front of Erik’s face.

Hernando moaned and ran a hand through his messy short brown hair. “Fucking scared the shit outta me, kid,” he complained. “Don’t do that to me!”

“Wake up!” Suber called and clapped his hands.

Erik stared out into space, unable to hear them.

“What’s the matter with him?” Hernando complained.

“Catatonia, you think?” Suber murmured.

Erik shut his eyes, unable to focus. When he opened them again, he faced the pale beige walls of the apartment where he stayed.

Erik groaned and sat up, rubbing at his face. He blew a heavy sigh as he shook his head, then rubbed at his temples. Planting his feet on the floor, Erik scrutinized his alarm clock with a split-flap display, frowning when he saw all the numbers read zero. He grunted and struck the clock.

“These dreams are going to be the death of me,” Erik murmured and ran his hands through his hair. His telephone

rang and he picked up the receiver. “What do you want?” Erik answered.

“What a rude thing to say!” said a familiar female voice over the line.

“I have a raging headache,” Erik complained and opened the nightstand drawer, withdrawing a bottle of painkillers.

“We have a new assignment,” said the woman. “You won’t have a lot of time, so listen carefully.” She said a series of numbers and Erik stiffened when the pain increased in his head, spreading behind his eyes. “Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Erik replied and popped the cap on the bottle.

“Now be quick about it. Make sure no one sees you.”

“Will I see you later?”

“You will.”

Erik hung up the line and swallowed several tablets, then chucked the empty bottle aside. Shuffling across the hall to the bathroom, he turned on the tap and ran his hands under the water, gulping down the pills.

Splashing water on his face, Erik looked up at his reflection, staring back at a tired young man with shaggy sandy red hair, sunken violet eyes, and several scars across his crooked nose, his right cheek, and down his left eye.

“Who are you?” Erik muttered. The telephone rang again and Erik ignored it, taking his time showering.

Later dressing in a dark shirt, slacks, loafers and overcoat, Erik headed for the kitchen, filling the percolator. The phone continued ringing off the hook and Erik grunted, picking up the receiver.

“Why do you keep calling?” he yelled.

“You really should get an answering service,” said the mysterious woman.

“I’m hanging up.”

“Don’t take too long. Your target will be out of the state in an hour if you don’t hurry!”

“Trust me, I got it.”

“He’ll be at the meeting downtown. It’s the thirteenth floor, the penthouse.”

“Anything else?”

“Dress nice. He like his boys pretty.”

Erik growled under his breath and threw the receiver at the wall, then stormed out the apartment.