

ONE

*Fade away into the light that shines, seeing what darkness
lies here before you...*

*A message, sent from another place, another time, just off the
border...*

Separated without form, in the realm of memory...

Worlds apart of your waking mind...

There lies another, who has your face, through the mirror...

*In the space without days, without nights as you tread the
halls of sanity...*

*From the darkness into the light, so fragile the threads, how
they disappear...*

There is a message from another time...

Go beyond the pain from the light into the darkness...

Erik Hart awakened with a gasp, chilled as cold sweat stung his eyes and ran down his face and neck. The shadows from the realm of dreaming slowly parted and his eyes adjusted to dawning sunshine filtering through his bedroom window, with weak rays of morning sun cutting into the pale white tiled walls.

The harsh glow of fluorescence from buzzing plate lights that beamed harshly down shifted into warm yellow wallpaper that had faint fluffy, cotton-candy clouds on a blue-sky background.

The sensation of hard leather straps holding down his wrists fell away to twisted bed sheets and the medicated smell gave way to the odor of bacon wafting from the kitchen downstairs.

His initial sensation of fear also dissipated into the realization that he was safely and comfortably in his own bed and not strapped onto some foreign restraining table. Yet, the coppery scent of blood never seemed to fully go away...

"Why do I keep having terrible dreams like this?" Erik thought and groaned as he pulled the bedspread over his head, knowing he would not be able to take much pleasure in rest any longer.

"Erik, it's time to get up," a faint female voice called.

"Not yet..." Erik moaned and turned onto his face, burying his head into the pillow.

"Come on, Son," called a cheerful male voice. "Rise and shine!"

"It's a nice day today," said the female voice that Erik could not quite place. "Let's go out and enjoy it..."

Erik blew a heavy sigh in return. *"They just won't let up,"* he mused, hearing his bedroom door open. "Alright, I'm getting up!" he grumbled.

Reaching out, Erik paused when his hand touched cold steel. Before his mind could figure what his fingers grasped, Erik froze when he heard that all-too familiar metallic click.

“Die,” a dark voice hissed.

Erik quickly sat up and stumbled out of bed, landing on the floor with a hard thud. His head crashed against his nightstand and he clutched it, reeling in pain as his ears rang loudly.

Erik panted weakly for breath, trying to focus on his surroundings and make sense of where he was. Grasping a hand to his chest, he took in a shallow breath and let it out slowly, concentrating on keeping in his banging heart that threatened to jump out of the confines of his ribs.

Relieved that he found no one standing before him wielding any weapons to do him some grievous bodily harm, Erik blew a shaky sigh as he rubbed at his eyes, trying to adjust to his surroundings. He moaned and hunched forward, wiping a hand over his face drenched with cold sweat, struggling to recall where he had been.

Annoyed that his head felt stuffed with cotton, he cursed at himself when no matter how hard he tried, his memory produced no results. Erik looked around the room, only to find that once his vision finally cleared, he stared at the blank beige walls of his apartment.

“I need to stop eating strange things so late,” Erik muttered, kicking off the tangled sheets that trapped his ankles. Yawning loudly once he got to his feet and stretched, he padded down the short flight of stairs into the kitchen and switched on the electric percolator.

Turning on the small television he had stationed on the nearby counter, Erik let the morning news filter in as he headed back to the bathroom to get ready for the day.

Washing his face, Erik looked back into the mirror and saw a porcelain-skinned young man with fiery red hair; slight freckles dotted across his narrow nose and highly defined cheeks and sleepy deep-set emerald green eyes that stared back. He smiled, displaying straight white teeth.

“Looking good,” he said brightly at his reflection and finished washing in the face bowl. Returning to his bedroom, Erik stepped into a pair of pajama pants, then glanced out to the busy street below as he tied the ties around his narrow waist.

Approaching the glass doors, he opened them wide and stepped out onto the small balcony, taking in the sights of the morning rush, watching cars going to their various destinations, choking the air with their exhaust.

On the horizon, looming high above the rest of the buildings, was the famous hundred-storey Farmless Tower at the edge of the city. The crystal-like structure held numerous offices and machinery that controlled the city’s power grid, only accessible by underground elevators.

It seemed to hover above ground with no wires, with a single steel support beam running through its center that also was its antenna. Surrounded by many panels coated with shiny, almost iridescent blue material that soaked in the sun’s rays to keep the electricity it harbored flowing, it was not only the city’s monument, but also the city’s only power source.

The testament to the former farm and mining town’s tower ran a newly discovered energy source, a substance called Corite. The diamond-like mineral could burn like coal, though very slowly and it provided billions of hours of energy as well

as heat for millions of homes in the area. The strange mineral was also claimed to save the planet.

Shaking his head to clear the vague memories that threatened to reach the surface of his mind, Erik experienced slight illness in the pit of his stomach as he left the window and returned to the parlor.

He opened the drapes and the room became washed in morning light. Erik perched on the edge of his simple dark beige leather couch, enjoying the view of the bustling city in which he lived as well as admiring the people who went about their day.

The telephone's shrill ring interrupted Erik's thoughts and he slipped off the couch, fetching the receiver from the end table close to the kitchen.

Picking it up, all he heard was a dial tone. Staring back at the receiver, he noted it was a blue-green princess model from a telephone company he could not quite call to mind. Erik shut his eyes and clutched the receiver as another faint memory surfaced that he did not have the time to suppress.

"Erik," the faint female voice called to him, "who was that?"

"They didn't say, Mother," Erik called back.

"Maybe they realized they dialed the wrong number..."

"Maybe you're right."

Erik opened his eyes and let out a cry when he found he held a pink princess model. Dropping it as if it were hot, he watched the receiver hang by its cord and swing from the end table's ledge.

Turning away, Erik slowly counted to five and peered over his shoulder, finding the blue-green telephone back in its place

with the receiver resting on the cradle. Blowing a shaky sigh, Erik walked into the kitchen. The scent of coffee permeated the air and he drew a cup to drink while watching the newscast.

Erik sat curled at the kitchen table, sipping plain black coffee from a mug while he half-listened to the droning reporter read out reports. He choked when he saw his picture appear on the small screen with the caption underneath that stated ‘wanted for questioning’. The mug crashed to the floor as Erik came closer, turning up the volume.

“That can’t be...!” he gasped, touching the glass surface as he peered at the screen more closely. “But it is me...”

At a loss when he could not remember the night before, he madly searched his mind for clues to where he had been. The ring of the telephone startled him and Erik left the kitchen, immediately picking up the line.

“You have twenty minutes,” said a cold female voice that left him breathless.

Erik stared at the receiver in shock. The dial tone flooded his end of the line. He slammed the receiver back in the cradle and bolted for the bedroom.

“... Considered a prime suspect wanted for questioning about the murder of a federal official,” said the voice of the reporter as Erik sifted frantically through his closet.

Coming to a pause when he found a suitcase with a note taped on its side: ‘for when you need it’, Erik opened it and found a change of clothing as well as a smaller case that also had a note taped to it: ‘for emergency use only’.

Opening the smaller case, he found a thin translucent blue pen with a silvery-blue cap resting inside and several cartridges. His fingers tingled slightly when he took out the pen and removed the cap, revealing a crystal nib.

“What a strange fountain pen,” Erik muttered, unable to decipher its meaning. He tucked the pen behind his ear and strained to hear the continuing newscast in the next room as he changed into jeans, T-shirt and slip-on sneakers.

“Menoka City police and Montana State troopers are on guard;” continued the reporter, “as Federal and other law enforcement officials are citing caution, for this individual may be armed and highly dangerous...”

The telephone rang again, and Erik quickly snapped shut the case, taking it with him as he hurried downstairs. Nervous as he slowly approached the phone, Erik picked up the receiver once more with shaking hands.

“Go to where the stars shine brightly,” said the mysterious female voice. Erik cringed, startled at the sound of a sudden bang outside his door. “Oh, and by the way, they’re directly outside.” The click followed and he dropped the receiver.

Rushing for the balcony, Erik let go of the case and threw open the glass doors. Before he could leap out onto the sidewalk below, sudden electricity surged through him. Erik howled in pain and involuntarily sank to his knees, stunned and unable to move.

Suddenly charged as the sensation immediately passed, Erik scampered to his feet, picking up the case along with him. He swung it at one uniformed guard who dodged the attack.

The guard, in a dark cap and glasses, rushed for Erik and Erik knocked him back with force from one more swing. The guard tumbled backwards into another that came directly behind him and Erik grunted when a third jumped onto his back, wrestling him down to the ground. The case struck the floor with a hard thud.

Erik ground his teeth as his arms were tied back with an orange ring. The guard tightened the restraining device around his wrists, applying pressure that threatened to cut off his hands.

Erik screamed when another jolt of electricity blasted through him, sending him forward on his knees. He panted weakly for breath and heavy footsteps stormed up to him from his side. A fourth officer grabbed his hair with a heavy hand, yanking back his head.

Forced to look up, Erik faced a uniformed officer in a dark helmet with a smoky visor that concealed his eyes. He spat at the officer and his head whipped to the side from a heavy backhand.

“We expected more of a fight outta you, boy,” the guard sneered.

Erik noted that their uniforms were similar, but the one who held his head had three gold buttons on the collar of the suit, while the three others only had one silver button.

“*He must be the leader,*” Erik thought, wincing when violently shaken. “*Why does his voice sound familiar...?*”

“Anything to say, boy?”

“What do you want with me?” Erik grumbled.

The uniformed guardsman withdrew a small silver pen from his pocket, flipped a switch on its side and shone a blue light into Erik's eyes. Erik yowled in pain and shied away.

"You ain't goin' nowhere, boy."

"It seems I have no choice."

Erik grunted when the guard increased his grip.

"Now tell me what you know," demanded the sentry.

"I don't remember anything," Erik spat and groaned when his head propelled back from another hard slap.

He wheezed for breath through gritted teeth as his nose bled and stiffened when he saw himself kneeling over a bloodstained body that wore a suit and carried a silver attaché case riddled with bullets.

"We saw the aftermath of your little show," snapped the guard.

"But...!" Erik let out a yell when struck again. He shook his head, trying to clear the grisly image of himself pulling the dead body out into a deserted alley and hoisting it with apparent ease into a large refuse bin.

"Who sent you?"

"Nobody!"

"What we want is an answer: yes or no."

"I don't understand -- for what?"

The lead guardsman let out a short laugh, and the three others chimed in with nervous guffaws. "Hear that, men?" he crowed, "He wants to know 'for what'!" Erik grunted when the guard grabbed his throat and pulled him up, holding him dangling several inches from the floor. "Don't play stupid with me, boy."

"I don't remember," cried Erik, "honest!"

"Do you think he got wiped before returning here, Sir?" asked the guard behind Erik. "The attaché case that held the schematics was never recovered..."

"My scanner picks up that he hadn't uploaded any programs to the system," said the one behind the head officer, holding a small chirping monitoring device.

"He's clean, Sir," murmured the guard on the lead officer's other side.

"Check that case of his," barked the head guardsman. "The one you fools didn't recover is most likely in plain sight!"

"On it," one junior guard replied.

Erik kicked back at the officer's chest and the guard let go, dropping him as a heap on the floor. Erik flipped to his feet and paused when he heard a high whine, facing a sleek black pistol at his forehead.

"I suggest you stop struggling, boy," the high-ranked officer sneered. Erik slackened; watching listlessly as the two guardsmen closest to the head officer opened the case, sweeping it with small hand-held scanners.

"Just an ordinary change of clothes and a fountain pen set, Sir," said one guard. "No blueprints."

"Do you think it's the *other* one?"

"Either way, kill him."

Erik broke out in cold sweat when the three remaining officers withdrew their pistols, pointing at him.

"*This can't be the end!*" Erik thought and screamed when all four shot at him at once. The immediate pain blinded him and he hit the floor on his side.

Suddenly Erik heard his heart beating in his ears and took in a weak gasp when he realized he wasn't dead. His eyes snapped open and dark cyan electricity surrounded his body. Sitting up, he shook his head, getting rid of the initial stun.

“Stop him!”

Erik rolled out of the way, dodging four more beams of high-powered shots before standing unsteadily to his feet. His hands grew eerily warm and the orange ties that held him shattered, freeing his wrists. Erik felt stinging pain at his ear and reached up, finding the slender pen still tucked behind his ear.

“Don't you dare, boy!” snarled the head guardsman as he turned the dials on the side of his pistol.

“What?” Erik spat back and waved the pen at them. “It's a damn pen!” he shouted. “What are you getting freaked out over?”

The officer readjusted the settings on his gun and Erik gasped when the pen began glowing in faint green light. Bright white light suddenly flashed and the pen transformed into a blue steel long sword.

“Get out of here!” Erik shouted, waving the sword that cackled intensely in their general direction. “Don't make me use this -- whatever this is!”

He turned, slashing at one officer who approached from behind, felling him in a wing of silver light that cut his torso in half. Blood splashed over him and the hardwood floor and stained the wall behind him. Erik backed away, shuddering in fright as the two remaining junior guards stepped away, clearly disturbed.

“Sir...” murmured one, “what do you think...?”

“Well, I think...” the second one interjected.

“It doesn’t matter what you think!” roared the head guard and fired at Erik. Erik seethed and staggered back, clutching his wounded shoulder that bled blue blood.

“*What’s going on here?*” Erik wondered, heaving for breath. “*What should I do now?*”

“You’re just lucky, boy,” snapped the lead officer. “Look, let’s get this over with and let us kill you -- let it be quick and painless.”

“Not this time!” Erik shrilled.

“Yeah, I know there’s probably nothing in the world that can hurt you, but that doesn’t mean you’re gonna stop me from finishing my job, boy.”

“You’re down by one!”

The head guard turned away, cupping an ear with his gloved hand. “Second team, take him out,” he ordered. “He’s a little hostile...”

Erik turned around as several more helmeted guardsmen burst through the front door of the apartment. He turned for the balcony and ducked, then kicked away the first guard.

“*This is insane,*” thought Erik as he sliced through one on his left and one from behind.

Another guard attempted to force him to drop the blade by grabbing his arm. Erik slammed his back into the wall, struggling to loosen the fighter’s tight grip. He hurled the guard toward the balcony’s window, sending him crashing through the glass.

Erik ran on automatic, decimating his highly equipped opponents with a long sword that hummed as he swung it through the air, effortlessly cutting through flesh as if it were a hot knife through butter.

Only the head guardsman remained in the limb-strewn bloodstained parlor floor, standing across from Erik as he panted heavily for breath. The guard had few gashes in his uniform and a cracked helmet.

“If I can’t get what I said through to you,” wheezed the guard, “then I’ve got other means...”

“Obviously you don’t seem to understand that you’re outmatched,” spat Erik. “Now get out of here!”

“Not when we have a fail-safe,” a familiar voice said from behind. Erik turned and took a step back when he faced a golden pistol pointed at his head, held by a smiling young man, a stranger to Erik who happened to have his face.

“Who are you?” Erik asked and swallowed hard when the handgun shone brightly in dark vermilion light.

“Well, well,” the young man said, “it’s a shame that you woke up too late...”

“...What?” A blast of gunfire blinded Erik and his ears rang. Seeing nothing but red, he lost his grip on the sword and staggered backward, then tripped over the edge.

In the nanosecond as he plunged, Erik realized with absurd clarity what a beautiful and perfectly still day it was, with no wind and few clouds. He looked up in mute horror after as it dawned on him that he was free-falling. He stared up at a stranger who had his face and grinned madly at the sight of his impending end.

As gravity took hold and Erik started the rocket ride ever swiftly down, he entertained ideas of seeing himself crashing barely a quarter-mile onto the ground below, where his body would become nothing more than a soft, wet, smashed beef slab and his skull disintegrating into fine powder.

Erik prayed to any deity who would listen to die of shock before the harsh reality of the painful onslaught of death overtook him.