

IONA PORTAL

BOOK ONE OF THE SYNAXIS CHRONICLES

Sample Chapters



An Epic Science Fiction Thriller by

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PART ONE: ENCOUNTERS

Chapter One: Lysandra

FLAGSTAFF MOUNTAIN ROAD – WEST OF
BOULDER, COLORADO – 1:35 AM

The speeding BMW's green xenon headlights burned fiercely in Lysandra Johnston's rearview mirror. "They're coming after us again..." she said, trying in vain to control the tremor in her voice, "...*faster* this time!"

Clutching the wheel tightly, she slammed the accelerator and let a wave of inertia push her deep into the seatback. The soft, leather-trimmed upholstery enfolded her torso, cocooning her in a protective embrace; but the increased speed brought no illusion of safety--her Corolla could not outrun the BMW. Her pursuers' low-slung coupe was effortlessly carving a path through the dark, twisting curves, relentlessly devouring the pavement as it approached.

With one eye on the mirror, Lys careened through a double hairpin turn, dropping down a low hill to an extended straightaway. Tall Ponderosa Pines flashed past as she accelerated hard, mashing the pedal to the floor.

Coming out of the straightaway, she squealed through a tight S-curve, barely keeping four wheels on the road. Her fading hope rekindled as the pursuing lights winked out of sight behind a massive granite outcrop. But that hope was instantly crushed when the BMW reappeared around the bend moments later, closer than before. The sudden burst of acceleration had temporarily increased her lead, but the men were now playing catch-up and overtaking her rapidly.

A flood of cold, unreasoning fear crept up her spine. "They're almost on top of us," she said, glancing nervously at her companion. "This has gone on *way* too long!"

Gritting her teeth in frustration, Lys looked for a place of refuge, searching the road ahead as it wound through a dense forest of Douglas fir... *a convenience store... a bar... some roadside café... any place with lights and people!* She saw nothing but cold, desolate pavement fading into darkness.

With no escape in sight, she fixed her gaze on her pursuers as they inexorably closed the gap.

The mysterious black BMW had come out of the gloom twenty minutes earlier and with no provocation engaged Lys in a harrowing game of cat-and-mouse--hurtling past her on the lonely mountain roads, then slowing, almost to a stop, to force her to pass. She'd tried to tell herself the men were just toying with her, but the looks on their faces made her skin crawl.

Her stalkers were almost on her rear bumper and still accelerating; the throaty growl of the BMW's engine reverberated in her ears. She gripped the wheel firmly, bracing for an impact, but in the last instant the men swerved to the left and roared past.

As they sped by, Lys saw a now-familiar face pressed hard against the BMW's passenger-seat window. By the pale light of the near full moon, the man's face appeared wraithlike, almost skeletal, with coal-black hair falling in oily tangles down his back. His blood-dark eyes were locked on Lys, staring at her hungrily.

Lysandra Leigh Johnston was no stranger to the longing gaze of men. At twenty-six, with an easy smile, carefully-toned body, and light, ash-blonde hair tumbling loosely across her shoulders, Lys had often held the starring role in a man's romantic fantasy. But she sensed nothing amorous, or even sexual, in this man's leer. What she saw in his ashen face was a terrifying look of bone-chilling brutality.

She shuddered involuntarily at the sight of him--a tremor of revulsion snaking through her core. She struggled in vain to delete his lurid image from her memory. The cruelty in his eyes gave her little doubt of the sadistic fury playing out in his imagination. *He's abusing me... Lys knew... raping me in his mind.*

She let out a sigh of relief as the BMW sped down the road to finally disappear around the curve ahead. She eased up on the gas and felt her body relax. *Maybe it's over... she looked hopefully into the darkness ... maybe they'll leave me alone now.* She wiped a bead of cold perspiration from her forehead.

Rounding the bend, her heart sank as a familiar set of brake lights flared brightly on the road ahead. *If I can just get by them one more time... she thought... in ten more minutes we'll be back home in Boulder.*

Her fingers shifted nervously on the wheel.

The BMW was still two hundred yards away, but the driver was pumping his brakes, rapidly decelerating.

Lys envisioned the cadaverous man in the passenger seat waiting for her--obscene eyes following her approach. She lifted her foot from the accelerator. Her breath caught in her throat and an icy knot formed in her belly.

Get a grip, Lys! She scolded, struggling to shake off the disquiet.

She drew a deep breath, held it several seconds, then blew it out slowly, consciously attempting to rein-in her emotions. *We'll get through this...* she assured herself, inhaling deeply again ... *Just stay focused ... Take it one step at a time.*

As the receptionist for the biggest law firm in the Colorado Front Range, Lys was well-accustomed to handling stress. At the office she'd built a reputation on her ability to thrive under pressure--always maintaining control in any crisis. Right now, though, she was far from her comfort zone.

"I know it's a cliché, Kareina, but I've got a really *bad* feeling about this," she said, almost in a whisper, as the BMW loomed closer.

"Don't worry about it..." her companion smiled condescendingly, brushing a long strand of jet-black hair from her eyes. "They're just *guys*. They saw a pretty blonde driving and are having a little fun with you. You're much too suspicious."

Tall and gangly with a plain face and pallid, almost sickly complexion, Kareina Procel had dropped by Lys's desk three weeks earlier, looking like a lost puppy. As the two spent their afternoon break talking, Kareina said she'd just moved to Boulder from a small town in New Mexico, hadn't yet made any friends, and felt totally lost in the big city.

Compassionate by nature, Lys was an easy touch for Kareina's hard-luck story. She'd gone to lunch with Kareina several times and spent one Saturday afternoon showing her the sights of Boulder. Even before the BMW showed up, however, Lys regretted going to tonight's party with her. Something about Kareina just didn't seem right.

"I'm suspicious? *Yeah, right!*" Lys jabbed. "Coming from such a good judge of character... You thought *Carrington* was a great guy!"

"Well, how was I to know he only had one thing on his mind?"

"Listen Kareina, I'm the blonde. You're supposed to have a brain in your head. We never should have gone to that party in the first place."

The BMW was now stopped dead in the lane ahead. Lys slowed cautiously as she approached, then pulled out to pass, flooring the accelerator.

As the Corolla struggled to gain speed, she caught another glimpse of the BMW's driver. He looked young, maybe still in his teens. *Probably took his dad's car without permission.* But his expression showed no hint of playfulness. His face was as gaunt and pale as his companion's and was fixed on Lys with the cold determination of a hunter stalking prey.

Despite the blonde jokes, Lys was no fool. She knew this was not a situation to treat lightly.

A glance in the mirror showed the BMW accelerating again, its 400 horsepower turbocharged V-8 roaring loudly as it bore down on the defenseless Corolla.

This time the men made no attempt to pass. Instead, the BMW pulled within feet of her bumper and matched her speed.

Her speedometer was edging 60, but Lys knew she couldn't keep it up. She was approaching a set of treacherous hairpin turns where the road zigzagged down the mountain to Boulder.

Entering the first switchback, she slid her foot onto the brake, taking the turn much faster than she should have. Her tires squealed, but the BMW was still riding her tail.

Near the midpoint of the curve, Lys gasped aloud as a breathtaking panorama appeared beyond the guardrail. Like a billion sparkling gemstones flung across a field of black velvet, the lights of Boulder exploded into view. *Almost home! If I can just stay ahead of them through the switchbacks.*

Exiting the hairpin, Lys straddled the center line, trying to keep the BMW from passing. The men responded by blasting their horn and flashing their high beams repeatedly--nearly blinding her.

She punched her accelerator but the next switchback was already in sight. Warning signs flashed past. The posted speed limit for the curve was 35. She tried to take it at 50, tires screaming in protest. *Too fast!* Hammering the brake, she froze as the Corolla broke into a skid, almost slamming the guardrail before she regained control.

Lys could feel her heart pounding. Adrenaline was flooding her bloodstream. Her breathing deepened, her palms went cold, and her hands were beginning to tremble. She gripped the wheel with whitened knuckles, struggling to control her rising panic. As the road ahead straightened, she jammed the accelerator to the floor.

This has been a night from hell from the start! It started with the god-awful party at Carrington's. Now this! Lys was beginning to wonder if she'd survive the evening.

She shot a glance at Kareina, but her companion seemed oblivious to the danger. Kareina was watching her intently with an amused smile. She actually seemed to be enjoying Lys's distress. *No wonder she doesn't have friends...* Lys thought. *She's STRANGE!*

But Lys had no time to think about Kareina. The BMW had coasted through the last curve, but now charged ahead, engine thundering.

Approaching the next switchback, the BMW pulled up beside her. The mountain here loomed close on the left with a sheer drop-off to the right.

Another cluster of warning signs swept past. The maximum speed limit for the turn was 30 but the men were pacing her--she didn't dare let them pull in front. She started into the curve at 50, barely keeping control.

Lys chanced another look at the BMW. The man in the passenger seat was leering at her, not three feet away, and the look on his face made her blood run cold. Something dark, malevolent, and not quite human was staring back at her. Their eyes met for an instant, and his lips went taut, baring crooked teeth in a vicious grin... the gape of a wolf about to rip the flesh of its cornered prey.

And in a moment of chilling recognition, Lys finally saw what the men were after. With gut-wrenching certainty, her mind embraced the terrible truth she'd been struggling for the last thirty minutes to reject. For Lysandra Johnston now knew, beyond all doubt, that the men in the black BMW were planning to kill her.

Her gaze fixed resolutely on the rapidly-tightening curve ahead. *A thrill killing...* the thought came numbly to her mind ... *and I'm to be the thrill...* Resisting a wave of nausea, her mind raced, striving frantically to form a plan of escape. But it was not to be.

At the tightest part of the curve, as her tires shrieked, struggling to maintain their hold on the road; the men swerved abruptly to the right. With a resounding concussion and the sound of shattering glass, the BMW slammed the Corolla hard, lifting its front end from the pavement and driving it into the guardrail. There was an agonizing scream of ripping steel, a crash as the guardrail gave way, and a long moment of silence as the Corolla sailed through the air.

The welcoming lights of Boulder spread wide before her. Lys seemed to float for a moment in mid-air. Then, by the glare of her one remaining headlight, she saw the ground rising to meet her... Everything was happening in slow motion, but she was frozen to her seat and could not move.

Clenching the wheel in helpless terror, Lys glanced at Kareina one last time. But Kareina was gone.

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Chapter Two: Kilauea

HALEMA'UMA'U CRATER, MOUNT KILAUEA, HAWAII

Pele angled the tip of one dark, leathery wing and banked to the left. Gaining altitude rapidly, she opened her mouth in an exultant roar as a blast of frigid, early morning wind buffeted her face. Eyes like glowing pools of lava scanned the horizon. From this height she could see the whole island, from ancient *Kohala* on the north to windswept *Ka Lae* at the south. She detected no sign of her enemies. *Perfect!*

Long waves of ebony hair flowed behind her as she descended toward Kilauea. Her prey was now fast approaching. She watched as the silver Porsche 911 *Carrera* slowed to make its turn into Hawaii's Volcano National Park.

All had been prepared. For two weeks, Pele had planted the sequence firmly in the victim's mind. There would still be a need for subtle mental influence in the last moments, but that would be easily accomplished. This victim *wanted* to be hers.

She bared her teeth in anticipation. Pele was still revered as a goddess on Hawaii's Big Island, but it had been a long time since she'd savored the taste of human sacrifice. Too long.

But her ancient enemies, the *Irin*, were in decline and would soon be vanquished. Even now, few remained who were strong enough to oppose her, and they were spread thin, distracted by pressing issues in distant places. The time was coming when she would again be free to do as she pleased on her own island. Then *all* of her ancient pleasures would be restored. Perhaps it had begun even now.

Pele had just begun her long glide toward the glowing pit of *Halema'uma'u* crater when she sensed something new. *No!* A presence had come ... she felt it. It was a presence she'd not encountered for many years. Her oldest adversary had returned. She rumbled quietly under her breath, *Araton!* ...then opened her mouth in a shriek of anger and frustration.

Erin let the door of the Porsche 911 *Carrera* swing softly shut behind her, waiting to hear the reassuring *thunk* of the engaging latch. She glanced quickly around in the pre-dawn mist to make sure no one was watching, then pulled her shawl tightly around her body against the early morning chill. Even in Hawaii it gets cold at 3700 feet.

Her eyes searched the darkness and found the path leading to the crater overlook, yet she hesitated, a look of confusion and uncertainty on her face. She glanced around again, eyes darting nervously like a frightened animal's. *Could she really go through with this?*

Most who knew Erin Vanderberg assumed she was in her mid-thirties, though in actuality, she was nearly a decade older. Taller than average, Erin stood five-eleven in bare feet, but she moved with the assurance and poise of a runway model. Her perfectly-formed face was framed by

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rich cascades of silken, chestnut-brown hair. Always impeccably dressed, she exuded an aura of beauty that women envied, and caused men to take a long and lingering second look.

That had been important to Erin once, but in recent years it meant nothing. Erin was tired... tired with a weariness that went far beyond physical.

Gathering her resolve she tossed her purse and keys through the Porsche's open window onto the driver's seat. *I won't need those anymore*; she thought to herself, then turned and strode briskly toward the trail.

It was a ten minute walk from the parking area to the *Halema'uma'u* crater rim. The path was barely discernable in the early morning gloom, but Erin knew the way. It had all been in the dream.

The dream had begun two weeks earlier, shortly after she arrived at the beach house, and had repeated every night since. It seemed a pleasant dream, in a macabre sort of way, and it was always exactly the same. By now Erin had every detail memorized. She could replay it in her mind at will.

The dream always began with her driving south along the windward coast of Hawaii's Big Island at four o'clock in the morning. By 4:30 A.M. she'd slipped through the near-empty streets of Hilo and begun ascending the long highway through the cloud forest to Volcano National Park on Mount Kilauea. Arriving at the park, Erin cruised through the entrance gate, unmanned at that hour, and turned left on the road to *Halema'uma'u* crater.

The area around *Halema'uma'u* had been closed to

visitors for several years, but in the dream the road barricades had been removed. Erin followed Crater Rim Road to the south and pulled into the deserted parking lot of the *Halema'uma'u* overlook at precisely five in the morning. The eastern sky was just beginning to glow with the faint light of a new day.

As the dream continued, she walked up the path to the crater's edge and easily vaulted the low fence designed to keep wayward tourists from approaching its crumbling rim.

Halema'uma'u looked like something from another world: an immense pit, 300 feet deep and 3000 feet across, set within the great caldera of the Kilauea volcano. Until the 1920s it had been a seething lake of fire, often boiling over its edges. But in 1924, following days of explosive eruptions, the surface fell to its present depth and hardened. Even now, however, lava often broke through, forming churning pools of molten rock on the crater floor.

Erin stood ten feet from the crater's edge and surveyed the chasm below. In her dream, *Halema'uma'u* was a pool of total blackness, an ocean of night. From its stygian depths, huge clouds of steam and sulphurous gas billowed skyward.

The ancient Romans believed the entrance to the underworld was located at *Avernus*, a volcano near Cumae. Erin had never visited that Italian volcano, but she wondered if it looked like this. It was easy to imagine *Halema'uma'u* as a bottomless pit stretching down into the interior of the earth--an open portal to the realm of the dead.

For her, that's what it would be... she would take a few quick steps and a long graceful dive into darkness.

She'd never see the jagged lava rocks rising to meet her. If she felt an impact at all, it would be a twinge of pain lasting only an instant.

As the dream progressed, Erin began to disrobe. That was an odd element of the dream, but it was the same every time. She would stand fully exposed at the crater's edge and casually remove every item of clothing; carefully folding her dress, shawl, and undergarments, and leaving them neatly stacked on her shoes at the crater's edge.

Tidy to the end, she thought.

She'd read somewhere that those who commit suicide by swimming into the ocean often strip at the water's edge and swim naked to their death. She wondered if a similar etiquette applied to volcano divers. It made sense really, exiting life the way you entered, totally unencumbered.

Finally she stood upright, naked, facing the crater. She relaxed her body and took a deep breath, like an Olympic diver about to go off the high board. Then, as she stood before the waiting abyss, a wispy form materialized out of the surging clouds of steam. Vaguely humanoid, the apparition drew closer and solidified, until a beautiful Polynesian woman with an abundance of flowing black hair hovered in the air above the crater, not thirty feet away. Erin somehow knew the woman was *Pele*, the goddess of the volcano. Pele hung in mid-air, suspended over the darkness, watching Erin and smiling.

Pele was the oldest legend of the island. Even when white missionaries came and supplanted the gods and goddesses of ancient Hawaii with Christianity, belief in Pele had endured. Erin didn't believe in God or the afterlife, but she couldn't deny that Pele was a real presence on the

Island. According to legend, *Halema'uma'u* was Pele's home. Locals believed she lived in the frothing lava that still belched from the crater's floor. Every year, hundreds of sightings of Pele were reported all over the island, and the natives still brought her offerings... not the human sacrifices of ancient times, but rocks and fruit, and even bottles of rum were carefully wrapped in *ti* leaves and left for Pele to find.

For a moment, Erin stood motionless, face to face with Pele at the edge of the crater. Pele hovered a dozen yards away, bathed in the rising clouds of steam. Then Pele smiled at Erin again and beckoned, and in the dream Erin responded. She ran toward the vision of Pele.

It was a brief sprint, and with each step she felt her body become lighter, until at last, her feet barely touched the ground. As she gracefully leapt into the crater, it didn't feel like falling; it felt like flying. She closed her eyes and drifted through space in perfect peace. A warm breeze was gentle on her face. She opened her eyes again. She *was* flying, and Pele was beside her. She was as light as a bird, soaring out over the pool of night.

Gradually she began to descend. There was no fear, only a feeling of infinite freedom as she glided silently toward the ocean of darkness. She relaxed and let herself fall. It was the perfect escape. Escape from Rex ... from the crushing weight of unwanted responsibilities ... from clinging people who always demanded more.

With Pele still beside her, she sank into the darkness, feeling the stress and fears of life falling behind as she descended into the pit.

Erin always woke from the dream with an

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overwhelming feeling of peace and contentment. It was a feeling she had not known for many years.

And now she was here, walking toward a volcano crater, following a dream-script that was embedded in her mind. It was a script that could only have one ending.

Erin walked in silence, purposefully. Scattered shards of *tephra*, tiny cinders of gas-frothed pumice, crunched underfoot.

What would people say? She thought to herself. She could picture the headlines... DALLAS SOCIALITE FOUND DEAD AT HAWAIIAN VOLCANO, APPARENT SUICIDE. *Would people even believe that? She was the envy of Dallas society. Everyone wanted to be Erin Vanderberg.*

What would Rex think? Enraged probably. Her husband would certainly feel no sorrow. Just anger that her choice of suicide could cause him to lose face.

Erin had considered leaving a suicide note. It seemed the right etiquette. But when she sat down to write one, she realized she had nothing to say, and no one she really cared to say it to. She just wanted everything to end.

Erin arrived at the crater's edge and quickly vaulted the low fence, then paused to survey the caldera before her.

To this point, everything had been exactly as she remembered in the dream. Even the barricades on the road to *Halema'uma'u* had been removed to allow her entry. *How had that happened?*

The eastern sky was glowing with the crimson light of approaching day. By its light she could just make out the great circle of the crater's rim. From somewhere far below an immense column of sulphurous steam and gas billowed

skyward before the prevailing winds caught it and drove it to the southwest.

As she studied the scene before her, Erin was startled by the silence. In Hawaii there were always sounds... the chirp of insects, the call of birds. Hawaii was filled with life. But here there was absolute silence. There was no life in this place. She was suddenly aware of the sulphurous fumes filling the air, making it difficult to breathe.

Trying to stay focused, Erin again recalled the dream. The next step was disrobing. Erin considered it for a moment, but hesitated. It was *cold*. The dream had never been cold. Yet an icy wind was now buffeting her body. Occasional gusts tore at her clothing and caused her hair to whip around wildly. Even with her shawl drawn tightly around her, she was shivering and her teeth were beginning to chatter.

Something else was wrong. The pit before her was not the peaceful pool of empty darkness she remembered from the dream. Near the middle of the pit she could see a boiling cauldron of liquid rock illuminating the jagged boulders of the crater walls and causing the rising clouds of steam to glow with a hellish red. She looked around in confusion. This was not at all what she'd seen in the dream.

Erin drew back a step and glanced around, frightened, uncertain. This didn't look like a peaceful exit from life. It looked like the pit of hell.

In confusion, she studied the billowing clouds of steam rising before her, hoping for Pele's appearance. But Pele didn't come. The clouds of poisonous gas and steam continued to rise silently skyward. It was becoming harder to catch her breath.

Amidst rising panic, Erin pondered her options. Her two weeks on the Big Island had been a badly needed escape. The beach house was located on a cliff overlooking the black sand beaches of Honokaope Bay. Surrounded by three acres of meticulously landscaped grounds, it amply met Erin's need for seclusion and privacy.

Erin came to the beach house at least twice a year. It was a place to get away from incessant demands and endless responsibilities. And most of all, from Rex.

Sheltered on the lanai, she felt *life* slowly begin to return. She usually spent her first few days sitting on the lanai, not speaking, not thinking, barely moving. She'd fix her eyes numbly on the horizon and watch as the sun crept slowly across the sky to end the day in a blaze of glory as it sank into the western Pacific. Gradually the surging tide of stress within her began to subside. By the end of the first week she could actually sleep at night without drugs. Panic attacks came less frequently. She even drank less.

But then the time always came to return home, and each time it was harder. In two days Rex's plane would come for her. This time she knew she could not go back. Not to the life she had known.

But was *Halema'uma'u* the answer? Its reality was nothing like the dream. The dream had given her hope. But the yawning pit before her held no hope.

Erin again strengthened her resolve. So this was *not* the dream. It was not the peaceful exit to life she had hoped for. But it WAS still an exit. This place was cold and dead and filled with choking gas, but she could still jump. By the time her body struck the rocks below she would have gathered enough speed that she'd barely feel a thing. She

could still do it. It would still be over. A fresh blast of bitterly cold wind hit her and she began to shiver again.

She looked around in desperation. *Oh God!* She thought. *This wasn't how I wanted it to end.*

But she saw no other way. Nothing would ever change. Rex's plane would land in Kona in two days, and that meant going home once more. She couldn't face the thought of it. Tears began to roll down her cheeks and her body was shaking uncontrollably.

She pulled the shawl more tightly around her and studied the short strip of earth between her feet and the crater rim, mentally counting the steps to the edge.

A brief sprint, no more than five steps. A quick run, and a leap, and it would all be over. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and prepared to make the final run of her life.

Suddenly a voice spoke... a man's voice. It was deep and resonant, and very close. The speaker was just behind her,

"I wouldn't do that, Miss Erin." The voice said, "*That* is not your destiny."

Startled by the voice, Erin's whole body shuddered. She spun around to see the speaker.

"Who are *YOU?*" She blurted, her voice tinged with both anger and confusion.

The stranger stood less than two feet away. He was tall. An African, apparently--his well-muscled body was cloaked in a colorful African robe that accentuated his rich, chocolate-brown skin. The man's head was closely shaved and his eyes were fixed on hers.

Erin froze in place.

He spoke again, his voice gentle, yet firm, "That is not your destiny, Miss."

Everything about the stranger exuded strength, yet his intimidating appearance was tempered by the kindness of his face.

As she stared at him, confusion quickly gave way to anger at the uninvited interruption.

"Who *are* you?" she demanded again, angrily.

"They call me Araton," he said calmly, and smiled.

Erin noted that he spoke with a strange accent, carefully enunciating each word. It sounded almost British, but definitely African.

"I've come to show you an alternative," he continued, glancing out across the caldera, "to this."

Erin followed his gaze across the crater. "There *is* no alternative." She said. "Nothing ever changes. Nothing *can* ever change. I can't take it anymore."

"Erin, you won't understand this, but I can see your destiny... I see what awaits you in the future. Or at least, what *could* await you. And if you choose the right path, I want to assure you that *everything* can change."

"What do you know about my destiny?" She shot back angrily, "You called me *Miss*. You don't even know I'm a married woman."

The stranger suddenly became very serious. "I called you 'Miss' because I *do* know you, Erin Vanderberg." He said, firmly. "We both know your marriage was a sham from the start. One of the reasons you're standing in front of this crater is that you know it's not real, but see no way out."

"Did Rex send you?" she demanded, spitting the name as though it was a dirty word.

The man laughed for the first time. A hearty laugh. "No, Erin. Believe me, Rex Vanderberg would have nothing to do with me."

"Then how do you know me?" she said sharply.

"I've watched you for some time now. I know many things about you."

"Like what?"

"For one thing, I know why you hate men. I know that every man you've ever known has only wanted to use you, abuse you, and control you.

"I know that you live in a golden prison. You have everything money can buy, and yet you have nothing. You've grown tired of inventing activities to fill up 24 hours every day.

"And you're weary of the causes to which you've committed yourself in a futile attempt to prove your own value. You're tired of bearing great responsibility for events you really care nothing about."

Erin's face hardened. He was reading her mail, but how could this stranger know her? She'd never seen him before.

Curiosity had now driven the thought of suicide from her mind. She turned to fully face the stranger for the first time. She tried to look him in the eye, but could not. There was something strange about him. She opened her mouth to speak, but could form no words. The stranger continued.

"Erin, the world is not as you've imagined it.

"It's like this volcano. You look into this crater and see a strange pool of liquid fire. You view it as an anomaly... something unusual and out of place in your beautiful world. You believe the real world is fresh and green, a place of oceans and forests and mountains.

"But the world you've experienced is just a small part of a larger reality. What you see in that pit is the true nature of this world. This planet is a spinning ball of molten lava. All you've known is a thin veneer of solid earth that floats precariously on that molten ocean.

"That's how you've lived your life. You've seen a tiny sliver of what is true, but there's a much larger reality beyond what you've known."

Erin stared at him in honest perplexity. "This isn't making any sense."

"Think of it like this," he said. "You've seen *The Matrix*..." The way he said it, it seemed more of an observation than a question.

"Of course."

"You're much like Neo. In *The Matrix*, Neo lived in his comfortable world and thought he understood it, but he never imagined the true nature of that world."

"And I suppose you're Morpheus?" Erin said with a hint of sarcasm. "You do look a little like him."

"Perhaps for you, I am Morpheus." He said. "I'm here to offer you the choice Morpheus gave Neo. Morpheus asked Neo to choose between two pills. The blue pill was a choice to continue to live in a false reality, oblivious to the truth. The red pill meant he wanted to know the truth, whatever it cost.

"My question for you, Miss Erin, is *which pill do you want?*"

Erin hesitated, uncertain where the conversation was leading.

He continued. "Choose the blue pill, and I'll turn and walk away. You can think of me as a kindly stranger who

saw you in distress and offered to help. I'll leave you free to jump... or not, as you wish.

"But choose the red pill, and I'll show you a world you've never imagined. The world as it really is. I can even show you the path to your destiny. But I must warn you it won't be an easy path... and you can't walk it alone."

"All right," Erin said, "Give me the red pill..."

"But first," she demanded, her body shivering and teeth chattering from the bitter wind, "Tell me who you *are*."

"I'll tell you everything you want to know, but before we talk, let's get you some place warmer." He smiled, "I'd hate to see you die of pneumonia after all this."

"There's an old hotel called Volcano House," he continued, "perched on the upper rim of Kilauea just a few miles from here. Believe it or not, Mark Twain once stayed there. They serve great coffee, and there's an old stone fireplace just off the lobby. The hotel has kept a warm fire blazing continually in that fireplace for more than a hundred and thirty years. I happen to know there are two very comfortable old wooden rocking chairs standing in front of that fireplace right now, just waiting for us."

She looked at him, but her face hardened. She said again, "Who *are* you?"

Araton answered with a broad smile. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me." Erin insisted.

"Miss Erin..." he said, studying her carefully. The truth is, I'm not a native of your world. I'm not even a human being. You would call me an *alien* ... but I assure you that I pose no threat. I've been sent here to help you."

KILAUEA

Seeing her face flush red with anger, the man quickly added. "I told you that you wouldn't believe me... but perhaps a demonstration would be more convincing than an explanation. Let me show you what I really am..."

With no further explanation, the stranger walked past Erin to the crater's rim. Erin followed him with her gaze. At the edge of the abyss he paused for a moment, looked at Erin and smiled. Then, without a word, Araton stepped off the edge of the crater.

Chapter Three: Volcano House

VOLCANO HOUSE HOTEL, MOUNT KILAUEA, HAWAII

Holding the coffee with both hands, Erin Vanderberg leaned back in the huge wooden rocker Araton had pulled close to the fireplace. The room was old and slightly musty, but very pleasant, and the warmth radiating from the fireplace was already beginning to penetrate her bones. She glanced around, admiring the hotel's rustic décor. It felt more like a hunting lodge in Alaska than a Hawaiian resort.

Hot coffee in one hand, Araton pulled up the second rocker and eased himself into it. Erin stared at him, mouth agape, still stunned by the recent revelations.

When Araton stepped off the crater's edge, of course, he did not fall. Instead, as Pele had done in her dream, Araton floated in mid-air, high above the crater floor. Gliding smoothly out about ten feet from the edge, he swung around to face her, as a set of huge white wings faded into view.

"My *God!*" she exclaimed. "What..." she fumbled for words, "...what *are* you?"

"I'm exactly what I claimed to be," he laughed. "But *you* wouldn't believe me." Seeing her still shivering in the

cold he added, "And I promise I'll tell you the whole story as soon as we get to the hotel."

The ten-minute drive to Volcano House took place in complete silence. Erin drove, still glancing in disbelief at Araton every few moments.

Entering the hotel, they found a fire blazing in the old stone fireplace, just as Araton had promised. Araton seemed to know his way around the hotel, and soon had two cups of steaming coffee in hand and the massive chairs arranged before the fire.

Taking a sip of the coffee, Erin lifted her eyes from the roaring fire to find Pele staring at her. She started... almost spilling her coffee.

A large, cast-iron image of Pele was affixed to the fireplace in place of a mantle. Pele's visage was grotesque, with immense bare breasts and a glaring face. Pointing toward the image, Erin laughed, "Now, who thought *that* was a good idea?"

"Probably someone who never met Pele," Araton came back.

His statement raised a question she hadn't considered. "So Pele is... *real*?" Erin said.

"As real as I am," Araton assured her.

Erin studied the image for a few moments, then added, "Well, Pele was much more attractive in my dreams."

"Of course, what you saw in your dream was not the real Pele," Araton countered, "You saw only an image she projected into your mind.

"Even those who meet Pele in real life don't usually see her as she is. Pele uses mind control to affect how people perceive her. Up on these mountains, for example,

Pele usually appears as a beautiful young woman with long, flowing black hair. Down on the coast she's seen as an old woman in white hair. Neither is real, of course. The real Pele is barely humanoid."

Erin tilted her head questioningly. "Pele can really control how people *see* her?"

"Pele's race possesses formidable mental abilities." Araton explained. "If she were here now, you might sit and talk with her for hours, and never suspect you weren't speaking to a human being."

"What *is* Pele?"

"She's a member of an ancient race called the Archons. Her people have been visiting your world for many thousands of years. Many of them, like Pele, have chosen to live here. But their intentions are not beneficent."

"And now tell me exactly what *you* are." She looked at him intently.

"My people are called the *Irin*." Araton responded. "We are, as you've seen, not exactly human, but we're similar to you in many respects.

"The Irin and Archons have both visited this world since ancient times, though only a few of your people have recognized our presence. However, our two races come here for vastly different reasons. The Archons' goal is to subjugate and destroy the human race and ultimately seize your world for their own. The Irin have been sent to prevent that."

With that introduction, Araton began his story. As Erin slowly sipped her coffee, Araton unfolded a picture of a world Erin had never imagined. A terrifying world. A battleground for alien races with the fate of the human race hanging in the balance.

At seven o'clock the hotel's restaurant opened, and Araton escorted her in. After filling their plates at the hotel's generous breakfast buffet, they chose a table by a large plate-glass window overlooking the Kilauea caldera. Erin's attention was captured by the huge clouds of steam silently ascending from *Halema'uma'u*. She shuddered at the thought that her body would lie broken at the bottom of that pit if not for Araton.

"Will Pele come after me again?"

"I doubt it," Araton responded. "Especially since you're leaving the Island. Pele is extremely territorial. She rarely leaves Hawaii. She sees this as *her* land, and in a way it is. At least she's helped form it. She's the one that keeps the volcano flowing, constantly expanding her territory. Once you're back on the mainland I doubt Pele will give you any trouble.

"But Pele is just one of the Archons. There are many others. And now that you're aware of their presence, they may target you more openly. But that *is* the path to your destiny."

"That's another question I wanted to ask. How do you know my destiny?"

"Let's just say my people relate to time differently than you do."

"You mean you time-travel?"

"Not exactly," Araton smiled, "but we can often see what lies ahead. Time has many corridors, many branching options. We have the ability to sense which corridor you're destined to walk, and what awaits you there.

"Right now, you have several corridors before you. Most of them are dark, but one is very bright. In fact, if you choose it, you may one day save millions of lives."

"What?" Erin said in disbelief.

Araton hesitated for a moment... "Erin, I'm saying that you are destined to be a person of great significance. You have things within you, abilities you're not yet aware of, that are vital to the future of your world. I see that clearly, and so do the Archons. There will come a time when you may save your entire race from destruction... but only if you make the right choices."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Your next step is to go back home. You must return home and do exactly as you've always done. You must take up your responsibilities and fulfill your commitments." As he spoke he could see the light fading from Erin's face.

"I know that's not what you wanted to hear, but the days ahead won't be easy for any of us." He lowered his voice, looking more serious than she had seen.

"Great changes are coming for your world. Great destruction threatens, but my people will do all we can to help you prepare. You're one of a small group of humans who have the potential to save your world from disaster.

"We're preparing to gather the members of this group together and it's vital that you are part of it."

"When will all this start?" she asked.

"Within a month you should receive a phone call," Araton responded. "It will be an invitation to gather with the others we've contacted. From that point, things will move quickly.

"I must be honest with you, Erin," he continued. "Pele's choice of you was not accidental. The Archons know who you are. They know you have the potential to thwart their plans and they won't stop in their attempts to kill you.

"The Archons have already killed two of those we'd hoped to gather, and they *will* target others. They're very determined.

"The season ahead will be a precarious time for all of you," Araton said, looking intently at Erin. "You're in a battle for your life and a battle for your world, and I can't guarantee that you'll win. You may not survive, but I see no other path for you to walk. To arrive at your destiny, you *will* have to face death."

"I've faced death once already today." Erin smiled nervously, "Doesn't that count?"

"No, Erin, you haven't faced death." Araton countered, "You tried to escape life, but you have not yet faced death. That's a very different thing. But that time *is* coming."

Chapter Four: Mystery

BRENTWOOD MEMORIAL HOSPITAL,
BOULDER, COLORADO

The darkness lasted a long time. Lysandra Johnston was dimly aware of unbearable pain. Of movement. Of people prodding and poking her body. More pain.

She struggled back to consciousness. There were vague shapes around her. Voices. One that seemed familiar somehow... but she couldn't place it. Then a wave of darkness crashed over her.

Lys opened her eyes again and struggled to focus. It was darker now. Someone was leaning over her... a woman dressed in blue.

"So you're finally back in the land of the living?" the nurse asked casually.

Lys looked at the nurse. "Where am I? What happened? I don't understand..."

It was an effort to speak. She tried to turn her head, but it seemed frozen in place. Bandages covered much of her face.

"Take it easy, honey," the nurse said softly. "You've had a hard time, but I think the worst is past."

Lys faded in and out of consciousness several more

EPILOGUE

times. Doctors and nurses came and went, performing their nameless rituals.

A man came--a police lieutenant--asking questions about the accident. Lys mumbled something incoherent about a black BMW and men with cruel eyes. Then darkness overtook her again and she slept.

There were dreams. Strange dreams. Surreal nightmares that grew more and more bizarre. She was in the car. Kareina was with her, but she no longer looked like Kareina. Kareina's face had lengthened and distorted and gained reptilian scales. As Lys watched in horror, Kareina drew her lips back, revealing jagged fangs. She was leering at her with eyes like coals of fire.

The dream shifted and Kareina was gone. A man was in the car, a stranger. They were floating together in weightlessness. Time had stopped. The man reached out and seized her roughly, grasping her body in his strong hands. Helpless to resist, he pulled her close, and held her in a tight embrace. Then the world exploded.

Another dream. Lys was in a place she didn't recognize. The landscape was stark and rugged, and the sky swirled in a maelstrom of ash-dark clouds. There were birds in the clouds, thousands of them, great birds that fought and tore. One of the birds held a long gleaming sword in its hand. And one looked very much like Kareina.

And then it was morning. Lys was still in the hospital. She struggled to remember how she got there but her mind was filled with fog. Disconnected images jumbled together in her brain, tumbling over each other: The men in the BMW. The warning signs flashing past. The sound of ripping steel.

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Finally Lys again heard a familiar voice. Climbing out of a deep well she struggled to open her eyes, and for the first time since the accident saw a familiar face.

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