# **Inner Diverse Excerpt: Chapter One**

I pulled out a second wad of soyka gum and chewed nervously then resumed paddling, eyes sharp for any boiling masses of water snakes. With each stroke of the paddle I disturbed the surface scum and left a wake of swirling colour. It released a foul stench of rotting compost. The brown mist hovered like a cobweb over the oily film. I searched for any sign of agitation and listened over the gentle chortling of the water between each paddle stroke.

I was in the Boiling Sea of Horus, after all; the sea that had once ensnared me with its numbing narcotic and whose nasty inhabitants had almost consumed me. It was here that I’d first heard that strangely familiar woman’s voice in my head. I thought initially that it had been the drug of the mist and sea. But the voice had followed me off planet, stayed in my brain along with some additional amino acids I’d acquired from those horrible snakes that had briefly invaded my body. Somehow compelled to return here, I was in search of…I wasn’t certain, except for the remote chance of finding my lost grandmother. She was, according to Ka, the answer to my past and my future.

I swept the hair back from my face and squinted, trying to see beyond the ten meters of visibility the dank mist allowed. Following my internal compass, I negotiated the towering islands with unease. The only warning that I was approaching one of their vertical cliffs came in the sudden slap, slosh and gurgle of the waves against the sheer rock face. Then within a heartbeat the slimy dark rock would thrust up like an apparition through the oily mist and I'd steer clear with a sharp intake of air. I must have passed at least a dozen islands as I continued toward my destination, a place in my mind, perhaps planted there by those beasts that had taken brief residence inside me. Ever watchful for the apophus, the giant snake that had previously batted my ship out of the sky then set its babies to consume me, I was acutely aware of my vulnerability in this small canoe. If the apophus was hungry it could easily overturn my boat and spill me into the churning water to either consume me directly or feed me in slow agonizing ecstasy to those nasty babies of hers.

A thin oily residue settled over everything and made me feel wet and clammy. It came from the vapour of suspended stench. I felt it already affecting me as my thoughts began to wander. They drifted as if in a dream, dangerously on the edge of being beyond my control. I tried to reign in feverish thoughts of the past few months. They swirled through my head like a hurricane, circling on *him*. Always on him…*the bastard*. The pirate who’d stolen more from me than I cared to admit.

I steered my mind from Serge and let it settle briefly on what had brought me here. It started with my dismal failure to warn Ka about the unknown traitor in his midst. Ka was, of course, still in seclusion on Uma 1 and blithely unaware that I was accused of assassinating his mentor Rashamon. His acolytes, knowing who and what I was, swiftly reported me to the authorities who’d given immediate chase. To elude them I had to abandon Ka’s *scimitar* that we’d been towing. And when Eclipse’s shadow trackers found us, I had to also ditch its precious cargo and my prize: the pirate Serge, who I’d finally captured. Now I was here, chasing yet another elusive thing: my truant grandmother and an answer to why she had done the unthinkable….

My head began to spin and I felt slightly nauseous…the cloying smell was overpowering. Was I going the right way? Some compass in my head had compelled me to bear toward a northern point on the convoluted shoreline. I’d been paddling for hours, but I could make out nothing in the thick fog. I shook my head to clear my mind and pulled out another soyka gum wad then joined it to the mass already in my mouth. My gaze settled on the iridescent swirling patterns of the whirlpools left in the wake of the draw of my paddle. An eerie quiet pervaded as if the mist veiled any sound except for the gurgle and trickle of my paddle dips. What had I been thinking? I had no idea and leaned back in the canoe, languidly chewing and wondering what I was doing here. I shut my eyes, paddle poised in my hands, and stopped chewing. I listened to the gentle lapping of the water and the lyrical sigh of the wind caressing distant trees and mountains. There were no other sounds. No birds, no animals. The quiet was almost oppressive.

…Why did all the women in my family do atrocious things? If Shlsh was telling the truth, my grandmother had been the worst. She’d betrayed all of humanity by letting the Vos into my world. It was absurd, really. Why did I believe Ka and that old Ngu—or Serge, for that matter—about soul-drifting? To enter someone’s dream and change the reality of an entire world?…

According to the fantastical journal of Genevieve Dubois, the first—and only—human to land on the planet Eos: Azaes, the leader of the Eosians, had kept all the previous human missions from landing on Eos by soul-drifting into their dreams and driving them literally mad. Only Genevieve, who had hidden powers of her own, had entered her own dream and manipulated it and Azaes; in turn driving *him* mad. When I had first read that, I’d laughed out loud, except now it was too close to home: Azaes, Earth’s first alien contact, was presumably my great-grandfather.

My grandmother had apparently entered the dreams of a hundred spiritual leaders and compelled them to create a gate—some kind of dimensional worm-hole, I supposed—in this real world. It was inconceivable. How could someone, a single person, have that kind of power?

*>I didn’t…It wasn’t just me…I had help, Vos help…*

“What—” I inhaled my gum and my hand slipped on the paddle. It fell into the oily water and drifted away from the canoe. I flung out my arms to retrieve it, throwing the boat into a violent rock. Warm water flooded into the boat with a burst of rank fumes and I jerked back, pitching the boat into a counter rock and nearly fell out. I threw myself onto my stomach and groped for the slippery handle floating in the iridescent scum. Hands scrabbling, I found purchase, bringing more water in. As I pulled the oil-covered paddle into the boat and kneeled to wipe the slime off my arms with shaky hands, the voice returned:

*>I was in love and I fell. Love tricks you. Love blinds you. I think you know about that, Rhea…*

“Shut up!” I shouted, clamping slime-covered hands over my ears. But the voice was inside my head. I raked back the hair off my face in a brisk sweep and in a more subdued tone I asked, “Who are you?”

*>Come this way. You will have your answers soon enough. Are you brave enough to handle them? You are almost there…*

I followed my intuition and paddled warily, anticipating and dreading what I would discover on shore. Would I find my missing grandmother? Diana Wood had been missing for over twenty standard galactic years. Was she the voice in my head? Or was it the giant apophus, whose babies had left a remnant of something inside me, seducing me with dreams and luring me into its lair?

A russet shore rose out of the fog like a ghost. The land immediate to shore was a fairly flat shelf of about a hundred meters before steeply rising into an almost vertical incline like the rest of the towering islands around me. The shelf was barren of vegetation, although the rust-coloured rocks were covered in that same iridescent film of putrid shallik oil and microbes that seeped from the mountains and islands of the Boiling Sea.

I made it to the shore and thanked God I hadn’t encountered any ‘boils’ in the water. This was one of the few places where the land was flat enough to beach a boat and get ashore, I considered as I scrambled out of the canoe onto the slimy rocks. I slipped off balance a few times but managed to get a stable footing and pulled the boat farther in. At dawn I’d left Benny at the southern end of this large body of water with instructions to remain there until I contacted him within fifteen hours—sunset. If I didn’t he was to go for help. That was seven hours ago. It was now midday. Bas wasn’t too far away, doing a reconnaissance with Raekwon in the outer 47 Ursae Majoris system, thanks to Ennos’s invisible hand of help. Under no circumstance was Benny to fly into the Boiling Sea mist, looking for me. The giant apophus was sure to bat him out of the air and then we’d both be jagged.

I straightened, wiping my hands on my self-cleaning Great Coat, and cast my gaze around, taking in the looming mountains ahead whose tops faded in a cloud of mist. I spotted the opening of a dark cave about a hundred metres away in one of the vertical cliffs and struck toward it, hand resting on my holstered MEC.

As I approached the cave, the wind appeared to increase. Then I realized with a chill on the back of my neck that the sighing came from within the cave. Pulling out my MEC, I crept to the entrance and, keeping to a sidewall, peered inside. I saw nothing except more rock, glistening with oily water. The sighing grew louder and I could now hear another sound as I moved toward the dark interior: the sound of shuffling. I let my eyes grow accustomed to the darkness before inching forward with a two-handed grip on my MEC. Something hissed lightly above me and I looked up. Just as I made out two glowing eyes, something large swept out from the darkness ahead and startled me into jerking back with a sharp inhale—

I gaped at the giant serpent-like creature towering above me. It had a woman’s wrinkled face, hoary wispy hair and multiple tentacle-like arms that protruded from its upper trunk. The wizened face hissed and its iridescent trunk coiled toward me with ominous purpose.

I stood my ground and swung my MEC up to the creature’s head. Before I could shoot the serpent knocked the weapon from my hand, and within a heartbeat another ‘arm’ lashed out and tried to pierce my left shoulder with its sharp talon. It thankfully failed to penetrate the Great Coat’s Kevlar-strength thixtropic material. Before I had a chance to react, it lashed out again, this time catching my exposed thigh. The claw pierced through my flight trouser material and sank deep into my flesh. Did I cry out? I wasn’t sure but the smarting pain grew instantly numb and I felt it spread through me. I scrambled to retrieve my MEC on the ground. Before I got very far I lost feeling in both legs and collapsed, unable to move.

The serpent bent its human-like face low until liquid green eyes peered directly at me. I drew in a sharp breath of alarm. The face resembled an ancient version of me! Then, fear slipped away as I contemplated a hideous thought: was this my grandmother?

The snake took my limp body up onto its scaly trunk and, supporting me with two of its ‘arms’, slithered down the shore toward the boiling sea. Panicking, my breaths grew shallow and I felt my heart thunder madly. This demon-thing was taking me to my doom. To feed her babies! Despite my horror I felt the pulsing rush of longing at the memory of her baby snakes dancing between my thighs. I remembered the shameless desire I’d felt as they’d wriggled among the folds of my groin and stroked me into yielding. If Bas and Benny hadn’t shown up just then, I’d have given myself gladly to them and sunk into the depths of the Boiling Sea, engulfed in delirious, mind-numbing ecstasy, to my death. Benny had completed his research and, to my disappointment, had found no drug given off by snake or water that I could pin my base behaviour on. It was all me. And now the apophus was going to finish what her babies had failed to complete. I directed my self-loathing at the creature and wondered what I really felt, why I’d really returned….

*>Don’t be afraid. I used to be your grandmother. I won’t hurt you.*

Oh, God! I was right!

*>Please don’t judge me by this form I’ve taken…Diana lives still.*

Unable to move, I accepted my fate. I tried to relax as the creature slipped into the murky water and swam along a narrow fjord toward a farther shore to the north. The bow wave off her slithering form surged past me, soaking me in oily water and I found myself lulled into a kind of drugged stupor. I lost track of time. This fearsome creature was once considered a sacred messiah-child by Earth’s Order of the Sacred Tree; Earth’s first alien-child to walk in quiet anonymity among humans. Now she was an apophus, a vulgar lonely creature exiled to this desolate place—

I was jolted awake by falling head first from the serpent-creature onto a swampy shore. I inhaled and coughed out swamp water before the serpent seized me again and secured my limp body on its long torso. It seemed that I wasn’t fated for the deep and her thousands of young just yet.

*>Apologies. You slid off…*

I started to feel sick with the jostling and bumpy swaying. The pungent smell of anaerobic mud and crushed vegetation stirred my nostrils and I looked up. I saw that the serpent was lumbering into a narrow canyon toward a ghostly grove of lanky trees. They resembled mangroves in the swirling mist. Within moments the snake began to make those same lyrical sounds that had intoxicated me the first time I’d come here. At the time I didn’t know who or what had made the eerie but beautiful sounds. Within moments an equally beautiful and more eerie multi-timbral chorus of feral ‘voices’ echoed off the canyon walls as if riding on the moving mist. I concluded against my own logic that this was some sort of communication between the apophus and…what? Surely not the trees?

I narrowed my eyes with sudden amazement. Was I seeing clearly? Were the trees *moving*?…I noticed large oval structures nested in several of the tree crowns. They resembled tree-houses, with sparkling lights running in a row along their diameter. My snake-grandmother approached one of the larger trees with a house-like structure and tall lanky buttresses. Securing me more tightly in one set of her many tentacle arms, she slithered with a jerk into a spiral up its trunk. She slid up to the house then entered an open doorway and deposited me on the straw floor of a large room with windows.

After propping my limp body against the wall, she coiled herself and brought her human-like head close to mine. She gazed at me with tired gentle eyes that reminded me of my mother. “I’m ssssorry I had to poisssson you with my anaesssthetic,” my serpent-grandmother said in a lyrical voice that clicked as though she had marbles in her mouth, “but I feared you were going to ssshoot me with that.” She placed the MEC on the ground near me. I hadn’t realized she had picked it up. Then she spoke again in a long hiss, “I ssso longed to sssee you and ssspeak wisssyou, my once granddaughter.”

“You can speak!” I gasped.

“Yesss,” my serpent-grandmother hissed with a faint smile. I could almost imagine her as a human. “These trees are part of an ancient soul and all manner of life can communicate through them. They let me speak like I used to, through this mouth, before I became what I am now.”

I took in my surroundings for the first time and stared at the soft pith-like surfaces. This was a living creature? I felt the gentle rocking and realized that it was the tree moving through the canyon! Were these the migrating trees?

She smiled kindly at me. “The Khonsus used to live in these tree-houses when they first came here, thousands of years ago. But they’ve since abandoned these ancient souls for more conventional dwellings and self-autonomy.”

I considered that my grandmother was touted by the Sacred Order of the Trees to be the scion of Genevieve Dubois and an Epoptes through my great-grandmother’s coupling with the ancient soul of the *vishna* tree; it was only fitting that she now communed with the migratory tree of Horus, another ancient soul supposedly.

“What…happened to you?” I ventured, trying to move but to no avail.

“When I came here to the Weeping Mountains twenty years ago, an apophus knocked my ship out of the sky and I fell into the water. It wasn’t long before a boil of infant snakes swarmed me and took my body. Hundreds of them entered me.”

I shuddered. My face tightened with the horrible memory of only seven invading me. Remembering how they moved inside me, I felt a sympathetic murmur in my stomach and an involuntary stirring in my loins as a hot wave of sickness overcame me.

“I was lost to them,” my grandmother hissed, her voice reverberating in my gut. I wanted to vomit but fought against succumbing. “They engulfed me in a wondrous dance, Rhea. Cleverly slid under my clinging wet clothes…” I’d been spared that much; I’d been naked. “…They whipped me with their frenzied embrace into a wanton creature of desire.” I felt a flush of heat surge through me followed by a bolt of pain in my gut. “They wooed me with their sad song and erotic dance, Rhea, and I let them take me.” God, I’d almost done the same, I thought with mounting dizziness, and stared at her hoary face. *That* was what I would have become: a giant snake-woman. It would not have been a final obliterating death after all, but a sort of ‘death’ then ‘rebirth’ into a living hell. “They devoured me,” my once-grandmother went on, “they became me; I became them.”

Like the *ouroboros* that devoured itself only to live again, I thought, staring at the swimming image of my once-grandmother.

“Diana Wood still exists, Rhea. But now, I am also one of *them*. An apophus. Each apophus is unique to its original host. The one who took down my ship was a Khonsus-apophus with a Khonsus head.” She eyed me with a piercing gaze. “There’s a little of them in you too, Rhea.”

I swallowed convulsively in a flush of giddy heat and fought down waves of violent nausea. But the sickness overpowered me and I abruptly vomited over myself.

“Oh, dear. You’re ill. You swallowed too much of the oily sea. Shallik oil is good for purging oneself of poisons, but it is a bit of a poison itself.”

I fought to regain my composure and felt my breaths stutter as I coughed out the rest of the burning acid in my throat. Slouched against the wall, uselessly limp and covered in my own rank vomit, I remembered only too well how good the oil was at purging the body. It reminded me of Ka.

“Why did you leave Ka?” I finally challenged in a hoarse raw voice. “Why did you come here?”

“To escape his devastating control. He mind-trapped me here, on Horus, for over sixty years. I finally managed to run away when he was sufficiently distracted. He’s a monster, Rhea. He manipulates with gold…You don’t believe me, I see.”

I stared, not knowing what to think. I imagined the old Khonsus, his infectious smile, the soothing cadence of his tenor voice and his wonderful stories. How could my grandmother say that? Ka was the most gentle, kind and wise being I’d met. I hadn’t forgotten that my snake-grandmother had tried to impose her fate on me the last time I was here. *There is no victory in resistance; only in yielding without surrender* she’d advised me…I’d be an aphophus if it hadn’t been for Bas and Benny rescuing me just as I surrendered to their compelling overture.

“Ka said you came to Horus to learn the music of the spheres,” I pressed on.

“Yes. I learned it…and more, thanks to these ancient souls,” Diana said. “But that’s not why I came to Horus. I sought him out ninety years ago to confront him for what he made me do before. He almost had me convinced all over again that I’d done the right thing. He seduced me all over again and kept me prisoner.”

I set my mouth in stubborn scepticism, realizing that my grandmother was blaming Ka for that atrocious thing she’d done and then for not doing anything about it after. I didn’t think she was all that virtuous, remembering the baby snakes swarming me.

“Ka is a spiritual man, a Gnostic,” my apophus-grandmother continued. “A great teacher. *My* teacher.” She nodded, as if to herself with a deep sigh of regret. “Ka is a complex being. A great philosopher and a genius. But he’s also a messianic tyrant and brutal strategist. Great beings are always complex and contradictory. He was once my mentor, Rhea, and my lover. I trusted his wisdom and intelligence. I loved him…and fell. He convinced me to submit to his mind control then betrayed my trust and mind-probed me into soul-drifting those mystics into dreaming that Gate open. He convinced me that it would connect our spiritual worlds together. I was so wrong, wasn’t I? I only let in those brutal terrorists on a killing rampage.”

I frowned at my serpent-grandmother and narrowed my eyes in disbelief. “Why would Ka do that?”

“You know so little, young one…You still don’t know what *you* are, do you? Or the powers you have. How you can save our two worlds or destroy them so easily—”

“Whatever I am, *you* were willing to make me into an apophus,” I cut her off sharply.

“Ah, you’re hurt by my betrayal.” She leaned back and her eyes looked mournful. “It was too late to save you, young one. My children were too many and too swift. And I…I admit that I’d grown weary of being alone and I savoured your company.”

“Like you did Ka’s before you abandoned him?” I said tartly. “Like you abandoned your *child*?” My mother.

That stung her and I felt cruel satisfaction surge through me like lightening. She let out a long exhale then continued in a subdued voice, “It gladdens me that your friends rescued you and that you are well.” She raised her head and brightened. “My children danced for you wonderfully though, didn’t they?” I felt an involuntary stirring in my abdomen and a pulsing burst of yearning between my legs. They had, I shamefully conceded. “No creature can resist their dance,” she continued. “Not even *you*, young one, who have run away from love all your life.” I fixed her with a look of misery. How could she torture me like this? “Ah.” She sighed at my expression and looked sad. “My children…” She gazed downwards for a moment, then looked at me again. “I birth a clutch, several hundred baby apophus, every cycle of our twin moons, Rhea. I need no mate for this. But I must feed them with a suitable host, a willing host. It saddens me when they starve. I have witnessed so many of my children wash up on shore, unfed, unfulfilled. I am *their* mother now, Rhea. Your body would have fed several clutches and lived to become an apophus. One such as I.”

I felt my teeth grind in mounting anger but kept silent.

“It is the way we reproduce,” she continued. “Otherwise the apophus would die out. Do you gainsay our need to survive?” She eyed me sharply and I broke off my gaze, unable to hold her stare of challenge. “And speaking of love and children *and* your mother…Ka and I met on Earth—he was with Eclipse for many years, did you know?” I blinked with surprise. “And I fell in love with him, Rhea. When he was in the human form.” I felt my stomach clench and stared at her. That meant…“Ah, Rhea,” she sighed longingly. “He was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen. Too beautiful. I still love him, monster that he is,” Diana continued. “He was a genius, a great philosopher and gentle humanitarian. I bore him a child, Rhea…your mother.”

My heart slammed. Ka was a Vos! Which meant that—

“NO!” I screamed. “I don’t believe you!” I stammered out in a thrashing voice. “You’re jagging wrong. I could *never* be a Vos!” I sobbed. “I hate them! They killed my—” I cut myself off and gasped.

“You know it, Rhea. Think of all the times you probably shape-shifted for an instant without even knowing. You only have to touch them once for your body to store the potential. Perhaps a Badowin for a burst of strength or a Fauche for swiftness or hearing, or a Xhix for better sight, an Eosian to smell. You’ve done that a lot, I can tell. Or how about a Scandi for rapid healing? Goodness knows you’ve done that a few times. Like when the blenoids attacked you; anyone else would have lost their leg from the septic wound, even with Benny’s help. Or when you got *dusted* by V’mer; your body should have permanently shut down long before Benny attended to you; or that awful skipboat accident; you should have died long before they reached you—”

“I’ve never touched a Scandi,” I protested sharply, wondering how my grandmother knew so much about my mishaps and a little annoyed that she did.

“You must have,” she insisted. “Without knowing it. Perhaps when you were a little child,” she replied with a complacent smile. I knew I hadn’t but I didn’t argue. “Rhea, you were always much more than a human.”

I suddenly found that I could move. Gasping with the release, I burst into motion. I scrambled to retrieve my MEC and backed toward what looked like a way out. My serpent-grandmother warily matched my movements, guarding the exit. I waved the MEC at her. “Get out of my way!”

“Rhea, beware of what appears good,” she hissed. “The music of the spheres is the key to all things, good and evil. Ka is a master of its music and an impeccable dissembler. A mad genius who must be stopped. He’s both your key and your doorway, young one. But don’t let him rule you!”

I had stopped listening. I couldn’t bear it. The discovery was too much. “Out of my way!” I shrieked. “I’ll shoot!” I pointed the MEC at her with a shaky two-handed grip.

She gazed wearily at me with sad eyes and reluctantly slithered out of the way.

I hesitated at the doorway of the treehouse, gaze darting to the ground moving below me. The tree lumbered, swaying to and fro. I swiftly holstered my MEC and began to climb down the smooth trunk.

“Rhea!” my grandmother called down in that melodious voice that reminded me of my mother. “Remember the *ouroboros*…Remember…if you must yield, *yield but without surrender*!”

I ignored her words and focused on scrambling down. Besides, I thought, the words made no sense: to yield *was* to surrender, I decided. Damn her. I prayed she wasn’t following. The trunk was covered with epiphytic vines that I could either hang onto or use as footholds. At least I thought so until halfway down when one of the vines gave way in my grasp and I fell with a shriek to the ground. I landed in a splat and a grunt of pain, legs collapsing beneath me. I’d landed in knee-deep murky water that released the sharp skunk-like stench of rotting vegetation. The tree lumbered on, ignoring me like sloughed-off debris. It continued with a dozen other trees through the canyon toward the Boiling Sea.

I scrambled up, feeling a sharp pain flame up my left leg. I realized my leg wasn’t broken, probably just sprained. Both my Great Coat and the swamp had absorbed my fall. Trailing fearful glances behind to where no one appeared to be pursuing me, I dodged around the oncoming trees and bolted inland, forcing my screaming muscles and painful ankle into a hobbling run. Away from the Boiling Sea. Away from those sentient trees and my lying grandmother-snake. I stumbled and gasped across the uneven ground. My face hit the ground and I scrambled up, tasting mud, and fought into a gallop, refusing to look back. Gulping in air. Ears ringing. Nose bleeding. Eyes blurred with tears.