

RAVENOUS MOTHER

TWO GATHERERS

A Motherverse Novella

J. R. KENDIRO

Ravenous Mother: Two Gatherers
Ravenous Mother Saga – Novella #2

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The Standards

I've done a lot of things in my life. Some I'm proud of, some I'm not. But they all taught me the same thing: **wasting time is a mortal sin.**

So here's what I promise:

No wasted pages. Every scene earns its place or it's gone.

Stories stick to their own rules. Whatever world I'm building, it stays consistent.

Emotional honesty. Dark when it's dark. Rainbows and ponies when it's rainbows and ponies.

Completed stories. I finish what I start. I won't abandon a series halfway.

Honest marketing. The blurb matches the book. The cover matches the tone. No bait-and-switch.

I write to leave something behind, for those who come after, starting with my son. I want to leave behind something worth keeping.

If something doesn't work, tell me. You give me honest feedback. I give you better stories.

J. R. Kendiro

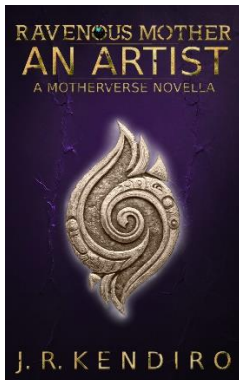
Thank you for reading this piece from the Motherverse.

To receive informational nutrients about upcoming chapters that will sprout from the tissue of the saga, subscribe to my newsletter at www.kendiro.com

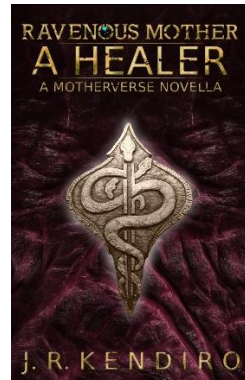
*The Mother feeds her readers,
The readers feed the Mother.*

My heartfelt thanks to the beta readers and ARC readers who helped shape this story. Your time, your honesty, your 'what the hell did you write here?' — they mean more than words can say.

Two other novellas set in the same universe are available for readers:



Ravenous Mother - An Artist
available for free [here](#).



Ravenous Mother - A Healer
available for purchase [here](#).

[→ Two Gatherers](#)

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[→ Wanna hit some graybark?](#)

[→ Where it all begins](#)

1 – A Dirty Rookie

Bulelani drove a sharp elbow backward. It caught a man square in the sternum, who coughed. Spit landed on his arm. A hundred gatherers were packed behind him, crammed like parietal membranes in front of the membrane-blackboard and the stilt-house poles.

"Knock it off!" he yelled. "Stop pushing into me, you bunch of idiots!"

A shot rang out. Everyone hit the ground. A man started screaming. The wounded man clutched his abdomen with both hands while the helical spine kept spinning inside his flesh.

Bulelani jumped to his feet and looked up at the tower. The overseer still had his rifle aimed.

"You're an idiot!" he shouted. "Now you go tell Zhisko we're down one worker!"

A man and a woman grabbed the wounded man and dragged him away from the crowd. His screams spiked for a moment, torn out by the movement, then went silent. The overseer withdrew his weapon, indifferent.

Bulelani gritted his teeth and gestured broadly at the towers and walkways where the overseers watched them.

"The more you squirm, the more those idiots up there get spooked and shoot. Wait! None of you can read anyway! Only me!"

"That doesn't make you smarter than us!" a voice shouted.

Several people snickered. Bulelani scanned the crowd through narrowed eyes. That morning the fog was so thick the glowstones in the Vault barely lit the inner courtyard of the Last Fort. For all he knew, the perimeter walls and stilt-houses had been swallowed and digested by the Mother during the night.

"It sure makes me more useful," he muttered. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. The humidity was suffocating.

He turned back to the glyphs carved on the membrane-blackboard.

"Third *corvée* squad to the gathering zone in the Black Heart. Report to the first departing worm: Bulelani, Meya, Lona, Nydo and..." He stopped, arching his thick eyebrows. "There's a mistake here," he grumbled. "Who the hell is Qaqamba?"

"Your new colleague," a voice answered from above him.

Bulelani raised his head. Above the stilt-house, a scrawny, nearly bald man watched him with his arms resting on the calcified railing. He smiled and pointed a finger at the clearing.

On the other side of the courtyard, a group of people stood apart in the fog, not joining the crowd.

"Are you kidding me, Zhisko?"

The head gatherer scowled and spat over the railing. Because of the crowd, Bulelani couldn't dodge in time. The saliva hit his shoulder.

Today everyone's decided to give me a bath, he thought.

"When you address me," Zhisko continued, pointing a finger at himself, "you call me head gatherer. Or Zhisko of the South."

Bulelani sighed. "I apologize. I was saying: are you joking, oh great head gatherer Zhisko of the South? You want to stick us with a rookie?"

"Better than being short-handed," Zhisko replied, pretending not to notice the sarcasm.

A man got shoved forward by the crowd. Bulelani pushed him back by stomping on his foot with his boot, drawing a grunt of pain.

"Thondo died yesterday. Couldn't you at least wait for the body to cool?"

"Thondo's body is already feeding the Mother, as it should be."

"You're a bastard, Zhisko!" someone yelled.

"You think you're a noble, but you're a commoner like us!"

The head gatherer leaned over the railing, baring his teeth. He pointed at his earlobes with one finger: they were painted bright green.

"Unlike you lot, my ears are intact! Who was that? Who spoke?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Bulelani spotted the towers and walkways running along the perimeter wall, connecting one stilt-house to another. Several overseers, armed with spine rifles, had already turned toward the crowd. Like the gatherers, they too had no earlobes.

For a moment he thought Zhisko would give the order to intervene. Instead, the head gatherer held back. Behind him, a woman appeared wearing a semi-transparent greenbark dress, taller than him. Zhisko gave her a nod and disappeared inside the structure.

"Finish reading the squad shifts and go introduce yourself to your new teammate. And try not to get this one killed like the last."

I should be in your place, Bulelani thought.

He lifted his chin and sniffed, then stopped. With all those people pressed against him, he risked getting spit on a third time.

He grunted and raised an arm, pointing at a series of glyphs.

"Fourth *corvée* squad to the latrines: report immediately to the tool shed..."

He kept reading for twenty minutes until the crowd thinned. Bulelani stepped away from the membrane-blackboard and nodded to a shirtless man with taut, well-defined muscles, and two women: one thin with a pockmarked face, the other tall and muscular, though not as much as the man. Like him, none of them had earlobes.

"How are you not cold, Nydo?" Passing the man, he clapped him on the shoulder.

"I am," Nydo admitted. "But my shirt's full of fungmoths. I put it under resin to clean it out."

Bulelani pointed at the newcomer, standing alone in the middle of the field.

"What do we do with him?" Nydo asked.

"I don't know." Bulelani hesitated. "Lona?"

The muscular woman wrinkled her nose. "He's a risk. Let's kill him as soon as we can."

"This morning," Meya continued, "at the gathering zone. There are only four other squads, we can..."

"You can make a mess like you did with Thondo." Bulelani clenched his teeth, fists tightening. "You're idiots! He hadn't done anything wrong."

"He'd found out about the plan," Nydo said. "And anyway, who cares? We barely knew him."

"I've known you three months and I want to see you dead way more than Thondo."

The graybarker frowned. He moved toward Bulelani, towering over him by his whole chest and head. His gray-stained lips curled.

"I don't like you either, shorty. Watch your—"

"Oh, cut it out!" Bulelani slapped him in the middle of the chest without moving him an inch. Nydo stood there, taken aback.

Bulelani jabbed a thumb at himself. "You're the ones who need me, not the other way around. And until proven otherwise, I'm the squad leader. If I tell you to jump, you jump!" He brought his face close to Nydo's, rising on his toes without thinking. "And if I tell you to dance, the only question you ask is what kind of dance I like." He swept his gaze to Meya and Lona. "Nobody kills anybody unless I give the order. Clear?"

Meya started to speak, then stopped, her hand going to the gut- noose at her belt.

The newcomer had approached. He was waving both hands above his head.

"Sorry, but I'm freezing my ass off here. Name's Qaqamba—you guys my squad?"

Qaqamba was smiling. He had a crooked jaw and a wide-eyed, naive look.

Meya unhooked the gut-noose and pulled it taut with both hands, staring at it.

"Put that damn gut- noose away," Bulelani told her, raising a hand. Then he turned to Qaqamba. "Yeah, you're on our squad. You a gatherer?"

Qaqamba laughed, spreading his arms. "No, I'm a cartographer. I'm so new my crest hasn't even grown in yet!"

Bulelani exchanged glances with the others. All three gave him the same look: *Is he stupid?*

"Less joking around. You ever worked here at the Southern Greater? With the polyps?"

Qaqamba shook his head. "I've only gathered food. Eastern Greater and Northern Greater. I was hoping to go West—everyone says it's amazing there. Double rations and half the work."

Bulelani let out a bitter laugh. "I spent my whole life at the Western Greater. The Greater Membrane is the same everywhere... except here in the south. Here it's much worse."

"Ah." Qaqamba nodded. "I figured, since they'd moved me here."

He touched one lobeless ear, then the other, also mutilated.

"Got caught a second time, and here I am at this fort. Why do they call it the Last?"

"Because it's the last place you'll ever see," Bulelani murmured.

On the walkway just above them, an overseer banged the butt of his spine rifle against the railing, producing a dull thud.

"You want to get moving?" He stared at Bulelani with a surly expression.

"Are we ruining your view?" Meya shot back. "Move it yourself, idiot."

Lona gave him an obscene gesture and held her hand up, frozen, until the overseer walked off muttering.

Bulelani approached Qaqamba. He held out his hand and introduced himself. The handshake made his knuckles crack.

"Yeah, you're a gatherer," he said, rubbing his hand. He pointed at the others and said their names.

"Welcome to the third squad. Let's go catch the worm. And Qaqamba..." He glanced at the overseer who'd walked away, then back at him, pushing the axe against his chest. "Try not to draw attention."

Qaqamba's stupid grin wasn't the response he expected.

By mid-morning, the fog began to lift. Sitting on the worm, Bulelani watched the Southern Greater rise like a colossal wall, membranous and pulsing, its contours fading into the dense humidity of the Vault. Up there, among arches and pillars, the glowstones shone dimmer than in other parts of the Sac.

The people on the worm's back had split up by squad. Nydo sat in front of him, chewing graybark from a shoulder bag. Behind them, Meya and Lona chatted. Qaqamba, beside him, had fallen asleep the moment he sat down. He snored so loud the women's voices got lost in the noise.

The animal flexed its body in slow waves, pushing itself effortlessly along the channel climbing the slope. Each contraction released a sweet scent from its pores. The movement came with a constant gurgling, generated by contact between its body and the channel. Bulelani felt the deep vibrations running through his legs. He understood why so many people fell asleep on a worm.

Ahead of them, the Black Heart forest covered the territory around the Southern Greater and much of its height. Hundreds of polyp-trees rose gray, black, or dark blue, with tentacles swaying around their stalks. All pulsed to the same rhythm.

He'd been seeing them every day for three months. He still wasn't used to that grim spectacle.

By Fortune, what am I doing here? he wondered for the hundredth time. And as always, he gave himself the same answer: *What I have to.*

A fungmoth landed on his neck. Its spongy body stuck to his skin, its tiny mouth-filaments burrowing in painfully. He crushed it with a quick motion, and the damp pulp pressed under his palm. He wiped his hand on his already sweat- and dirt-soaked clothes. The new stain gave off a rotten smell, so familiar it didn't disgust him anymore.

Nydo turned around, chewing a graybark root. His lips, permanently stained by that bitter juice, had taken on the same dark color as the root. He pointed at Qaqamba with a jerk of his chin.

"What do we do with him when we get there?"

"Nothing," Bulelani replied. "We show him the work and see what he's worth as a gatherer."

Nydo spat on the ground at Bulelani's feet. He checked his boots: the grayish spit had missed him by a hair.

"And if he notices you slipping away?"

"You saw him, Nydo: he's an idiot. We'll tell him some story and he'll swallow it without questions."

The giant looked back at Qaqamba, one corner of his mouth lifting.

"Better to take care of the problem now."

Bulelani snapped toward him, eyes narrowing. "No initiatives! You already did something stupid with Thondo. Two deaths in two days in the same squad is enough to get the overseers interested. Maybe

even the guardians!" He lowered his voice. "Seriously, Nydo: Qaqamba better still be alive when I get back to you."

Suddenly, Qaqamba's eyes flew open and he shouted, slapping himself on the temple so hard his voice cut off. Nydo and Bulelani stared at him, startled.

Qaqamba examined his hand, dirty from the fungmoth.

"Gross." He wiped it on his pants and smiled at Nydo. "I was having an amazing dream—want to hear it?"

"Tell Bulelani." Nydo stood and walked away. Qaqamba raised both eyebrows at Bulelani.

"Forget it. Get up, we're here."

"Huh? But the worm's still moving."

Meya and Lona had gotten up too. The other squads were doing the same.

"Get up, idiot!" Bulelani repeated, shoving him.

Qaqamba rose grumbling while Bulelani climbed over him to get in position.

Nydo gave him a chin-jerk toward the front.

"First squad's already ready," he muttered.

Three women and two men clung to the worm's lateral growths, ready to descend. Behind them, another squad was in position.

"Doesn't matter. We just need to get there third. Let's move."

He grabbed Qaqamba by the arm and dragged him forward. Together, they climbed over other gatherers who hadn't been quick enough to stand.

"What's the rush?" Qaqamba asked, as a thick-bearded man cursed when he stepped on his foot.

"Sectors in the gathering zone aren't assigned." Bulelani positioned himself behind the second squad. A glance back confirmed his whole squad was ready. Satisfied, he continued: "The sooner we get off, the sooner we can claim our work sector. The best ones are the most sought after."

"Ah, I see. And why's one sector better than another?"

"Younger polyps, easier to cut. Fewer puddles attracting fungmoths. Fewer stringers."

Qaqamba's eyes went wide. "I thought stringers only came out at night!"

"Usually, yeah. But if we make too much noise, they can wake up. Doesn't happen often, but when it does..."

Nydo moved behind Qaqamba. A hand landed on his shoulder, fingers squeezing tight. Qaqamba flinched.

"Don't do anything stupid." Nydo leaned toward his ear. "When we run, you run. When we stop, you stop. Clear?"

Qaqamba nodded, his smile trembling at the corners. "I'm a good runner. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried." Nydo squeezed harder until Qaqamba winced. Then let him go.

The worm slowed. The waves crossing its body became slower, wider. The gurgling faded to a muffled hiss.

Bulelani bent his knees, ready to spring. Ahead, the first squad was already taut as a bow. A man on the left leaned over the worm's edge, one foot already suspended in the void.

"Stop!" the woman next to him shouted, reaching out an arm.

The man jumped. His feet hit the membranous floor and immediately sank to the knees. The tissue closed around his legs like a hungry mouth. The man screamed, arms stretched forward, grabbing for something that wasn't there.

The worm was still moving, though slowly. The man's body was dragged sideways, toward the animal's pulsing mass. The floor membranes stretched, then sucked him under.

A gush of blood exploded upward, spraying the worm's flank. The scream cut off abruptly. They heard the sound of crushed bones and disgusted comments from people on the worm.

Bulelani shook his head. "Amateur."

The woman who'd shouted turned toward them, her face still twisted with shock. Bulelani smiled at her, gesturing with his thumb at the empty spot in their line.

"You're down to four. Better step aside."

She flipped him off. He chuckled. Nydo cracked his knuckles one by one. Qaqamba watched them without saying anything.

The worm stopped. The vibrations ceased. The silence lasted a heartbeat. Then it exploded.

About twenty people jumped off the worm at once. Feet hit the motionless floor and took off running, elbows raised, shoulders forward.

Meya landed and sprinted right. Her elbow came up, catching a man's nose to her right. The gatherer fell backward with a muffled cry. Blood exploded across his face.

Nydo grabbed two men by the shoulders and spun them with a twist. Both hit the ground.

Bulelani saw something whistle through the air. He ducked and a black petroclast grazed his hair. He straightened up at a run without turning to see who'd thrown it.

Qaqamba jumped over the man Meya had dropped. He stared at him as the guy still pressed both hands to his face, then looked at Bulelani in bewilderment.

"What the hell is going on?" he yelled, waving his hands as he ran. Ahead, a squad reached a mound where a red membrane flag stuck out. A woman stretched out her arm and touched it. She turned toward the pursuers, fists raised and legs spread.

Bulelani slowed, making a hand gesture. "Let's catch our breath. Not many people ahead."

The squad eased up. The pace became more sustainable. Nydo breathed hard but steady. Meya wiped blood from her elbow with her sleeve.

Another squad reached a second sector. They shouted something Bulelani couldn't hear.

At the third sector, Lona sprinted ahead. She touched the flag, turned, and bared her teeth in a savage grin. The others slowed even more, almost walking.

Qaqamba panted beside Bulelani. His eyes were wide, mouth open. "You gonna explain what this is about?" he managed between breaths.

"Already told you. Best spots are most wanted."

"Yeah, but why'd we fight?" Qaqamba stopped, bending forward with hands on knees. "By Fortune, we're gatherers, why..."

Nydo burst out laughing, a deep laugh that shook his shoulders. He approached Qaqamba and clapped him on the back.

"They cut your lobes recently, huh?" He grinned, showing broken teeth. "Learn, kid. There's no *we* around here."

Qaqamba didn't answer. Bulelani thanked Fortune for his good sense. He put his hands on his belt and surveyed the surrounding area.

The polyp forest began just steps from the flag. The stalks rose like slimy columns, tall as the fort's stilt-houses, maybe more. Halfway up, they all pulsed together, a slow, hypnotic beat. The tentacles

swayed without sync, some thin as arms, others wide as a worm. They wove through the air above the gatherers' heads, blocking the glowstone light.

Qaqamba turned and found Meya and Lona at his sides. Meya smiled at him.

"Know how to use an axe?"

"What a question!" Qaqamba lifted his chin. "I was born with an axe in one hand and a shovel in the other."

Lona shook her head and pointed at the nearest polyp-tree.

"Come on, let's see how you do with a southern axe."

Nydo approached Bulelani, lowering his voice.

"Alright, you don't want him dead. So what do we do?"

Bulelani glanced at Qaqamba, then back at Nydo.

"Keep him busy. Work him like a worm, no breaks. I'll be back within half an hour."

"What are you doing?" Meya shouted.

Bulelani spun to look. Qaqamba held the axe with both hands, half off-balance. The blade was stuck between Meya's feet.

"It's unbalanced!" Qaqamba protested, waving the axe.

Bulelani crossed the space between them in three strides. He snatched the axe from his hands and lifted it with one hand, spinning it. The black petroclast blade whistled through the air. The horn shaft was smooth and polished.

Qaqamba pointed at the tool. "What am I supposed to do with that little bone? It's so light!"

"Nothing wrong with it." Bulelani handed it back, forcing him to take it with both hands. "Unlike regular axes, this one has weight distributed along the whole length. This is a southern axe. It's not just for cutting."

He paused, pressing the axe against Qaqamba's chest. "It's for defending yourself."

Qaqamba stared at him, puzzled. "From what? The polyps?"

Something huge passed overhead, blotting out the glowstones in the Vault. The shadow swallowed them.

Qaqamba looked up and swallowed. The tentacle was wide as two men side by side. It withdrew toward the forest and the glowstones reappeared, casting flickering light on the ground.

Nydo laughed, a guttural sound.

"I'm supposed to defend myself from that? With this?" Qaqamba groaned, waving the axe in his hands.

Lona smacked him on the back of the head. "Not from that. If that attacked us, we'd all be dead." She pointed at the lower tentacles swaying near the stalks. "Those, though, are dangerous. When we get close, one stands guard while the others cut stalk sections. Luckily they're not fast, but there's a lot of them... and they pop up when you least expect."

Nydo leaned toward Qaqamba, grinning. "And they're always hungry."

The squad headed toward the nearest stalk. Bulelani looked around. The other squads were scattered through the forest, too far away to notice him.

As soon as they stopped, several tentacles began emerging from the forest, pointing at them. Qaqamba stepped back and stared at the others, who didn't move.

"Uh, shouldn't we run?"

Nydo laughed and positioned himself in front of the tentacles, chest out. "No need," he said, crossing his arms.

Qaqamba's jaw dropped. "You want to fight them?"

The first tentacle brushed Nydo's skin and recoiled, shuddering. The others approached less and less, until they kept their distance. More and more ends emerged from the forest and surface, staying away from the man and the squad behind him. Within minutes, the tangle of tentacles formed a semicircular wall blocking the view of the forest behind.

"How'd he do that?" Qaqamba asked.

"Nydo's a graybarker," Meya answered. "You smell how sweet he is? That's from the stuff he takes. Lots of things in the Black Heart find it... annoying."

Despite that, the woman stayed alert, axe in hand, eyes on the tentacles.

"But that's amazing—he's a human repellent!" Qaqamba exclaimed.

"So why don't we all use it?"

Meya laughed. "Be my guest. If you want to forget how to count, go impotent, and live a few short years."

"Hey, I can count!"

"You said nothing about the impotence," Lona teased.

Nydo shot them a confused look. "What's that word mean?"

The two women laughed.

"That's enough." Bulelani made a hand gesture. "Get to it. Lona, show him the three-point cut. Meya, Nydo, stand guard."

He walked away along the forest's edge while Qaqamba started swinging the axe, watched closely by Lona.

As he went, the floor changed under his feet. It became harder, uneven. Tentacle-roots surfaced from the ground, thick as arms. He had to step over them one after another. The light faded. Above him, more and more tentacles intertwined, filtering the glowstones to a gray twilight.

The air tasted of sweet rot, like fluid left to ferment. Each breath left a slimy taste in his throat.

He glanced toward the forest interior, twisting his lips.

How do they live in there? he wondered.

After some distance, he reached a felled polyp-tree. The stalk lay horizontal, wider than a worm. The tentacles kept swaying along its

entire surface. Even the stalk kept pulsing, but out of rhythm with the forest.

Bulelani approached the cut end. The cut revealed layer upon layer of tissue, some hard as cartilage, others soft and covered in bubbles. A thick liquid dripped from the center, forming a dark puddle on the floor. The smell was stronger.

He stopped and waited.

From the forest's darkness a figure emerged. It moved without making a sound, as if its feet didn't touch the ground. He was tall, much taller than Bulelani, covered in gray-black slime. His face was covered by a mask made of polyp bark, rigid and dark. Eyes barely visible through two slits.

He had a horn spear in hand. At his belt hung several pouches and a petroclast blade.

By Fortune, what the hell happened to him? Bulelani thought, stepping back without meaning to.

The man stopped in front of Bulelani. He stood silent, motionless as a polyp stalk.

Bulelani cleared his throat. "Langa?"

The man nodded. "You didn't come yesterday."

"There was a complication."

"You mean your friend who got killed?"

Bulelani made a surprised sound. He ran a hand over his forehead.

"You saw us, huh? Thondo wasn't our friend. He'd figured out the

plan and my people stopped him from talking. I didn't give the order."

"They acted without your order?" Langa tilted his head. Bulelani imagined him smiling under the mask. "Having leadership problems, Bulelani?"

"I don't have any problems." His fists clenched. "Now tell me what I need to do."

Langa straightened his head. "A convoy will be here in seven days."

"Five. They moved up the delivery for the end of Stagnation."

"We need a head gatherer on our side." Langa gestured toward Bulelani. "Another one, I mean."

"Zhisko of the South isn't exactly the type."

"Incorruptible?"

Bulelani laughed. "Never met an honest head gatherer."

"Then what's the problem?"

Bulelani pointed a finger at Langa. "You. Skimming a little here and there is one thing—doing business with Kamva's band is another. Zhisko's no fool. He'll never accept that kind of risk."

"You accepted it. Are you a fool?"

Bulelani's fists tightened more. "I didn't..." he started loudly, then looked around and continued quietly: "I didn't accept anything. I'm the one who came looking for you. Remember that!"

The two stood silent for a moment. Bulelani leaned back against the fallen stalk.

"What if we blackmail him? If he won't help us willingly, we can try forcing him."

"Kidnap his wife?"

Bulelani brought a hand to his chin. "No, that might work once or twice, but then people would ask questions. Worse, Gocina's a gatherer herself, with monthly quotas to meet. Zhisko would have to declare her dead, or a guardian would come poking around." He raised a finger. "But if he declared her dead, he'd have to explain how she came back months later. At minimum, he'd lose the head gatherer position and his lobes for inefficiency. No, we need something more subtle."

Langa tapped his spear on the ground, impatient. "Figure it out. Doesn't matter what you do: if it works, it's fine."

"And after?" Bulelani asked. "Will I be part of the band?"

"You have five days."

Langa began walking toward the forest. Bulelani set his jaw.

"How many times do I have to prove my worth?" he shouted, not caring who might hear.

"Five days," Langa repeated, disappearing behind a polyp-tree without a sound.

Bulelani closed his eyes and counted to eleven to calm down. He headed back, quickening his pace and skirting the forest again. The fog had thinned enough to see the other squads in their sectors. He

knew he'd taken more than half an hour. He found Qaqamba still working, surrounded by the other squad members.

Piles of cut stalk lay scattered around him. They were triangular sections, chest-high and twice as wide, cut along three vertical lines following the tissue grain. Each piece was still wet with sap and fluids. A couple of the more recently cut ones had edges that moved like waves. Nydo stood in the same position where he'd left him, facing the forest. The tentacles, now uninterested in them, had dwindled to a dozen.

Lona stood nearby, her massive arms crossed over her chest. She watched Qaqamba work without saying anything.

Bulelani approached her.

"I told you not to get him killed," he said quietly. "Not even from overwork."

Lona smirked without taking her eyes off Qaqamba.

"He might be an idiot," she murmured, spitting a jet of saliva. "But he's a real gatherer. Must be as strong as me." She paused, then admitted: "Maybe even stronger than Nydo."

She pointed with her chin downhill, where the slope descended toward the main gathering zone. More stalk sections had already been rolled downhill, stacked in neat piles.

Just then, Meya grabbed the last piece Qaqamba had cut. The woman grunted lifting the polyp piece from the slimy ground, then pushed it

over the edge. The wedge tumbled down the slope with heavy thuds, leaving a shiny trail.

Qaqamba wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm, then saw Bulelani and smiled, raising a hand in greeting.

"You went to take a nap, huh?" he called out. "Good for you! If I were squad leader, I'd do the same. Nice!"

Nydo chuckled and gave Bulelani a light elbow. "You're right. We don't even have to worry about making up an excuse. He comes up with them himself."

Bulelani nodded and looked up. All the glowstones were active. The light, filtered by the giant tentacles woven above them, flickered. In the distance, a couple of squads had already stopped for rations.

"Alright, break time. Let's eat."

They sat in a semicircle, facing the Black Heart. Each took from their pouch a sphere as big as a head. Bulelani pressed his lips to the orifice and started sucking. He felt mushroom pieces without tasting them, overpowered by a stronger, sour aftertaste. He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"They cut the rations with resin again," he snapped.

The others nodded angrily.

"They treat us like animals," Lona said. "Might as well feed us membrids! Who could ever..." She went quiet, watching Qaqamba suck the sphere holding it with both hands until he turned red from

the effort. He finished by taking a huge gulp of air and letting out a thunderous belch.

"Horrible!" he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he pointed at Lona's sphere. "If you don't want it..."

The woman clutched the sphere to her chest, frowning. "Don't even think about it!"

Qaqamba laughed, slapping his thighs with his hands. Meya put five loaves of greenbread in the middle. Nydo grabbed one immediately, and when Qaqamba did the same, Meya slapped his hand—but Qaqamba didn't let go of the loaf.

"Hey," the man grumbled. "I can take a joke, but if you think I'll let you eat..."

"We all do it," Bulelani interrupted. "Nothing personal."

He took the loaf from his hands and tore off a piece, tossing it to Nydo, who caught it mid-air. Lona and Meya did the same.

"Now it's your turn," Bulelani said to Qaqamba, who gave him a surprised look.

"Why?" he asked, tearing off part of his loaf and giving it to Nydo. The giant snatched the portion from his fingers and brought it to his mouth. Chewing, he showed a bicep and gave it a loud pat.

"Takes food to maintain these," he said, mouth full.

"Here in the south it's better to be ready," Bulelani explained, eating his own piece of bread. "Every squad has a graybarker, and since rations are poor, it's up to us to keep him strong."

"Oh." Qaqamba thought about it. "That seems... logical. But I don't like it."

Bulelani laughed. "Nobody likes it. Except Nydo, I mean."

They sat in silence for a while. Then Qaqamba started telling a story without anyone asking.

"So, there's this newlywed couple in a house that's too small. So they ask an architect for help, who shows up and starts examining the walls. You following?"

Nobody raised their head from their food.

Qaqamba smiled slyly and continued. "Finally, the architect talks to the couple and says he can grow a new room. He points at a recess in the wall and drops his pants, saying: 'To do it, I need to fertilize your house.'"

Nydo's head shot up, coughing. Meya and Lona said simultaneously: "What?"

Qaqamba chuckled. "Yep, that's how architects do it—didn't you know?"

"That's not true!" Bulelani exclaimed. "Stop telling nonsense!"

"And how do female architects do it?" Nydo asked, scratching his head.

Qaqamba raised a finger, smiling. "Got another story for that one! But first hear the rest: he asks the couple if one new room is enough or if they want two. They both say they want two."

"Obviously," Lona commented, bringing food to her mouth without looking. Qaqamba had everyone's attention.

"The architect tells the wife: 'Then I need your husband's help.' The woman objects: 'I don't want my husband cheating on me with a wall!' but the man slaps her and says: 'I'm in charge in this house, woman!' He drops his pants and tells the architect: 'I'm ready!' So the architect goes up to the husband, smiles at him, then gets behind him and says: 'Very good! We'll start by fertilizing you.'"

Lona burst out laughing, a raucous laugh that made broth spill from her mouth. Meya chuckled too, shaking her head.

Nydo looked from Qaqamba to the two women with a blank expression.

"I don't get it," he said, making the others laugh even harder.

Seeing Nydo getting agitated, Qaqamba motioned for him to stay seated. "Wait, I'll tell you the other story, with the female architect." Bulelani kept eating in silence, watching Qaqamba gesture with the crumpled, empty sphere still in his hand, laughing before he even finished the punchline.

He really is an idiot, he thought. He could tell everyone I really was sleeping on the job.

He frowned, imagining the questions that would follow: who in their right mind would go sleep alone at the edge of the Black Heart?

Maybe Nydo's right. Better to kill him.

When the second story ended, Qaqamba started singing at the top of his lungs, off-key on every note. The others yelled at him to stop, and Lona threw a piece of slimy stalk at him, hitting him right in the face.

Bulelani laughed as he crumpled his sphere and swallowed the last bits of food. He huffed through his teeth: it was just more resin.

He looked at the crumpled sphere. Then he thought of Zhisko, up on his stilt-house, looking down at him.

I know how to trap you, bastard.

He smiled.

GLOSSARY

Entries are listed alphabetically and include only elements present in this novella.

Architects: Members of a profession that manipulates the organic growth of living structures. They "cultivate" buildings through glandular stimulation techniques and tissue grafts, and program worm routes through glyphs incised directly into the animals' skin.

Axe, Southern: A specialized gathering tool with weight distributed along the entire length of its horn shaft, unlike regular axes. Designed not just for cutting polyp-tree stalks but also for self-defense against tentacles and other dangers in the Black Heart.

Bagpipe: A living musical instrument that requires careful feeding and maintenance. Can become "constipated" if fed too much resin, causing it to produce strangled sounds until cleared.

Band: An outlaw group that raids cargo worms and redistributes stolen food. Kamva's band operates from within the Black Heart, using the forest's dangers as protection from guardians.

Bioclast: A creature found within the Sac, sometimes encountered dead in necrotic pools.

Black Heart: A vast forest of polyp-trees surrounding the Southern Greater and covering much of its height. Extremely dangerous due to tentacles, stringers, and other hazards. Home to outlaw bands who coat themselves in protective substances to survive among the polyps.

Cartographers: Members of a profession that studies and maps the Sac's membranes. Recognizable by their white and gray clothing and elaborate crests running down the center of their shaved heads. They survey polyp-tree growth to contain the Black Heart's expansion.

Commoner: The lowest social class, including gatherers and other laborers. Some commoners have their earlobes cut off as punishment for crimes, marking their degraded status. They are subject to Selection at age forty.

Corvée: Forced labor shifts assigned to gatherers, posted daily on the membrane-blackboard. Assignments range from gathering in the Black Heart to latrine duty to dangerous necrotic tissue removal.

Descent poles: Smooth calcified poles used to move between walkway levels and the ground in stilt-house settlements. Users grip with their legs to control their descent speed.

Earlobes: Social markers of status. Nobles have elaborately pierced lobes; profession members have intact lobes painted in colors indicating their rank; commoners who commit crimes have their lobes progressively cut away.

Extractor: Medical instrument composed of a translucent rotating needle connected to a pulsing vesicle. Used by healers to draw blood or other bodily fluids. Causes intense pain during use, especially when the needle is inflamed.

Fortune: A deity or concept venerated alongside the Mother, associated with luck and chance. Commoners often invoke Fortune in oaths and prayers.

Fungmoth: A small parasitic creature with a spongy body that lands on exposed skin. Its tiny mouth-filaments burrow painfully into flesh. When crushed, it leaves a damp, rotten-smelling pulp.

Fungus-chair: Living furniture that grows from the floor, shaped to adapt to the body of whoever sits on it. Reacts to weight by modifying its own consistency.

Fungus-table: Living furniture that grows from the floor, used as communal eating surfaces. Often drips with condensation from ceilings.

Gatherer: A commoner who harvests food, resources and performs other manual labor. Gatherers work in squads led by a squad leader, with graybarkers providing protection from tentacles.

Glowstones: Bioluminescent formations embedded in the Sac's vault that regulate illumination, creating day-night alternation. They dim to reddish light at night and can be obscured by polyp-tree tentacles.

Glyphs: Symbolic writing systems. Common glyphs are used for public communications and can be read by literate commoners. Architects use their glyphs incised into worm skin to program their routes.

Graybark: A dark, clump-like substance that graybarkers chew to produce their characteristic sweet smell. Highly addictive and

progressively destructive—causes memory loss, emotional instability, and shortened lifespan. The first dose produces intense pleasure, making addiction almost immediate. Extended use leads to unpredictable violent episodes.

Graybarker: A gatherer who chews graybark, producing a sweet smell that repels polyp-tree tentacles. Essential for squad protection in the Black Heart. Recognizable by their gray-stained lips. The substance causes progressive mental deterioration, memory loss, and eventual death.

Greenbark: A textile material derived from the Mother's membranes, semi-transparent and used for clothing. More valuable varieties exist for higher-status individuals.

Greenbread: A loaf-like food staple distributed to gatherers as rations. Quality varies; sometimes cut with resin by corrupt head gatherers to stretch supplies.

Greater Membrane: The vast organic structure forming the Sac's primary anatomy. Hundreds of meters tall, it defines the boundaries of the known world. Divided into geographic regions: Southern Greater, Western Greater, Eastern Greater, and Northern Greater.

Guardians: Members of a profession dedicated to maintaining order. Recognizable by their serrated teeth. They carry vesicular staffs and wear blackbark raincoats with chest plates. Extremely dangerous combatants with superhuman reflexes.

Gut-noose: A weapon consisting of living tissue that can be activated by squeezing one end. When wrapped around a target and properly triggered, it constricts and expands, capable of strangling. Has a safety mechanism that must be released before use. Some owners name their gut-nooses.

Hauler: A gatherer temporarily assigned to carry equipment and supplies for cartographer expeditions. Graybarkers are often selected as haulers for their strength and protective smell.

Head gatherer: A literate commoner who manages gatherer operations at a fort, assigning corvée shifts and maintaining records. Recognizable by painted earlobes (green indicates rank). Has access to better food and housing but remains subject to Selection.

Healer: A member of the medical profession, recognizable by crimson-colored nails developed through symbiosis with organic receptors. Healers have authority to perform Selection on

commoners and possess specialized medical instruments. They answer to noble law.

Healing membranes: Translucent organic bandages that move frantically when near blood, then mold to wounds and stop moving once properly applied.

Heatfungus: A bioluminescent organism that radiates warmth, grown in buildings to provide heat during cold periods.

Horn shaft: Material used for tool handles, made from calcified organic matter. Smooth and polished for gripping.

Horn spear: A weapon with a shaft made of horn material and a sharp point, used for combat and hunting.

Ichor: Bodily fluid that flows from wounded organisms, often with corrosive properties.

Last Fort: The southernmost gatherer settlement, located near the Black Heart at the Southern Greater. Known as the harshest posting due to dangerous working conditions, poor food, and proximity to the polyp forest. Named because "it's the last place you'll ever see."

Lymph node: Organic growths used as food for worms, carried by attendants.

Membrane-blackboard: A living surface where daily work assignments are carved with a stiletto. Located in fort courtyards for gatherers to read.

Membrane-window: A translucent organic opening in walls that serves as a window. Can be opened by inserting a finger into a side orifice and making specific movements. Has defensive mechanisms—can sever fingers of unauthorized users.

Mother, the: The enormous living organism within which all humans of the Sac exist. Considered a deity who requires human sacrifices (Selection) in exchange for hospitality and nourishment. The source of all organic structures and life within the Sac.

Mother's Mouth: Circular openings surrounded by red fleshy folds that pulse, used to dispose of organic waste including corpses. They react to organic matter by dilating and aspirating with peristaltic movements.

Necrotic tissue: Dead or dying organic floor material, black and glossy, that forms pools of fermenting liquid. Removal duty is extremely dangerous due to stringers that emerge from the pools.

Noble: The highest social class, exempt from Selection and able to live until natural death. Recognizable by elaborately pierced earlobes.

Overseer: Armed guards who maintain order among gatherers at forts. They retain one or both earlobes (depending on their history) and carry spine rifles. Answer to the head gatherer.

Petroclast: Calcified organic material of extreme hardness, available in different colors. Used to create blades, tools, and structural reinforcements. Nearly indestructible.

Polyp-tree: Tall organic growths with stalks covered in tentacles that sway and grasp. Found in the Black Heart forest. Stalks are harvested using three-point cuts. Trees pulse in unison and can "scream" when felled. Young polyps are easier to cut than older ones.

Rations: Food distributed to gatherers, typically consisting of spheres filled with nutrient broth and pieces of greenbread. Quality varies by location and can be adulterated with resin.

Resin: A substance used to preserve organic materials and clean items of fungmoths. Corrupt head gatherers sometimes cut food rations with resin to stretch supplies and sell the excess.

Sac, the: The term inhabitants use for their world—a biological pocket within the Mother's body. Includes the main city, peripheral areas, the Greater Membrane, and underlying systems. A totally closed environment with its own ecosystem.

Selection: The ritual sacrifice of humans to the Mother upon reaching age forty, or earlier as punishment. Methods vary—some are Selected quickly by healers, while criminals may be thrown alive into a Mother's Mouth.

Sphere: A spherical organic container for liquids with an elastic membrane that opens for drinking. Used for food, drinks, and storing fluids like winefluid. Can be crumpled when empty.

Spine rifle: A weapon that fires spiral spines with great force. Requires reloading and has a safety mechanism. The rifle itself is

organic and can become "annoyed" if mishandled, potentially firing on its own.

Squad: A working group of gatherers, typically including a squad leader, a graybarker for protection, and several regular gatherers. Squad members share food to keep the graybarker strong.

Squad leader: A gatherer who leads a work squad, responsible for their safety and productivity.

Stagnation: A seasonal period of extreme cold and heavy fog within the Sac. Conditions worsen when Stagnation ends.

Stilt-house: Elevated dwellings built on support poles above the ground, accessed via walkways and descent poles. Common housing in gatherer settlements.

Stringer: Dangerous creatures that emerge from necrotic pools and underground. Composed of numerous thread-like appendages with triangular-pupiled eyes on bulbous tips that weave together to form a larger body with a tooth-filled mouth. They hunt by sensing vibrations and are drawn to blood. Primarily nocturnal but can be awakened by noise. Their feeding is violent and swift.

Tendon rifle: A weapon that fires long, slimy projectiles capable of killing quickly. Used by cartographers.

Tentacles: Appendages that extend from polyp-trees, varying from arm-thin to extremely massive. They sway, grasp at potential prey, and can emerge from the ground as tentacle-roots. Repelled by the smell of graybark.

Three-point cut: The proper technique for harvesting polyp-tree stalks, involving three vertical cuts following the tissue grain to create triangular sections.

Trace: A biometric signature registered with organic structures like valve-doors and membrane-windows. Allows authorized users to open secured passages. Can be deleted or transferred by those with architectural knowledge.

Valve-door: An organic opening that functions as a door, composed of membranous flaps that open in response to specific stimuli. Can recognize authorized users through their trace. Defensive mechanisms can harm unauthorized entrants.

Vault: The curved upper surface of the Sac environment, studded with glowstones. Represents the "sky" for inhabitants.

Vesicular staff: A weapon carried by guardians, capable of incapacitating targets.

Winefluid: An alcoholic beverage stored in spheres. Quality varies by color—purple indicates strong, high-quality winefluid. Drinking is restricted for young profession members.

Worm: Large segmented creatures used for transportation along canals. They move through muscular contractions, releasing sweet scents and producing deep vibrations. Routes are programmed by architects through glyphs incised into their skin. Worms can be split in two and continue functioning, though they eventually die from such trauma. Cargo worms carry food supplies in pouches attached to their flanks.

WANNA HIT SOME GRAYBARK?

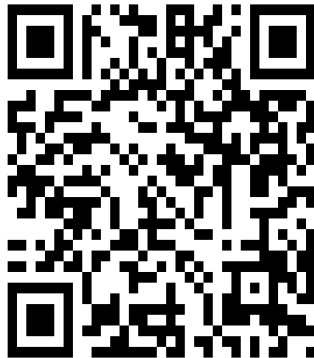
There you are!

On the worm too, huh? You'll dig it down South. Big guy like you, strong arms... wanna hit some graybark? Why the face? Not scared, are ya?

Go on, grab from [\[here and ride it out\]](#), buddy.

Got a mate who wants a taste? [\[Boom, extra for 'em\]](#).

Catch you after work, alright? And wait for the worm to stop before you hop off!



WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

DESCENT – BOOK #1



The Mother. A titanic organism, humanity's home and ravenous god.

Housing sprouts like fungus from flesh, wrapped in membranes, supported by cartilage. No stone. No metal.

Within her pulsing bowels, Thandie is a cartographer, not a hero. She maps the veins of the Greater Membranes, hunting for food. She shuts her eyes during executions, obeys her superiors, prays she won't be selected before forty.

But when she discovers an epochal threat and is ordered to stay silent, she can no longer stand aside.

Hunted from the high towers of the professions down to the sewers, fleeing through living conduits and breathing pits, she becomes the heretic cartographer.

She refuses to close her eyes anymore: if she can't find food, she'll become food.

"The Mother feeds the child. The child feeds the Mother."

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