

Opening extract from
Mammoth Boy

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Published by
Matador

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CHAPTER 1

Smell drifts in the air, brushes on to the boy from those plants that grow only here as he crawls through them, trying not to touch their acrid leaves. To a hunter's eyes no two plants stir alike in a breeze. This the boy knows.

Plants that thrive only here, in the shade of the overhang. Bits of white stone from the scarp overhead fleck the dark slope of soil where the plants root. He creeps onwards till he sees the cave-like hole just beneath the scarp. A scrape of bare earth shows where something climbs to its lair, then skids back down through the plants.

He watches till the sun moves behind the scarp, chilling the air, and he shivers, not only from the chill. On knees and elbows he worms backwards through the plants, faster and faster until he is able to get up and run down the combe, legs working with a will of their own, through the bracken down to the tree-line and the sun-lit meadows beyond, where women are moving slowly from bush to bush, one holding an infant, another suckling her child under her short summer cape.

They espy the boy – not one of theirs – and go on with their berry-picking. One gestures at the bushes; for the stray boy, a sign that says 'eat'.

The mothers. They know nothing of the smell, the rank weeds below the cave, his secret place.

More smells drift, home smells, soot and charred bones. These the boy often dreams of, stirs in his sleep when he does.

Good times of burning fat, suet, marrow, plenty.

The boy trots ahead of the women into another combe, wider, well-treed, with a brook running down its centre forming pools and cascades. Far up the combe looms the distant bluff that seals it off from all beyond. The boy trots on, to turn towards wisps of smoke filtering through brushy growth on a rock face.

He hoists himself to peer over the cave ledge. Only the old woman is there, by the fire. She rocks on her hunkers, mumbling, grimy and shrivelled. At his appearance she shrinks back: fear of beasts, of males, of violence on old women. But it is only the boy. She cackles, prods the fire till blue flames lick up the smoke.

Fire-crone, guardian of warmth.

“Food?”

Again she cackles, tooth stubs worn to the gums.

Old Mother, feeder of young. Her long-gone young. This boy. A young male.

She holds out a thigh-bone, broken off at one end. Meat hangs on it.

As he gnaws, sinews running through his teeth, flesh filling his mouth, she crinkles with pleasure.

“You like?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I keep for you. One day you strong hunter.” He is used to her broken speech. Unlike most of the women, she has never learnt the clan language well. She was traded from far away, from beyond the mountains – when she tells the boy, her hand flaps over and over for the many days travel to a high land where the great ice lies, even in the warm times – and from a language she has never unlearnt. *Land of herds, of plenty, of her young time.*

Often she rambles back into the tongue of her girlhood. He listens, staring with wonder at the strange sounds. His mother had lulled him in her tongue too, sweeter, less rasping than fire-crone’s.

*His mother, her woman-smell under the furs, unlike any other woman's.
That he remembers.*

Maggots slither out of the broken end of the bone on to the rubbish-strewn floor of the cave-shelter, squirming into the debris, droplets of life for the boy to squat and catch. They taste of unripe, milky kernels. He taps the bone on a flat stone to knock more out, a whole handful.

The old woman watches, her leathery face creasing with pleasure to see him eat, the motherless boy, a no-one's child.

She draws beasts in the dirt for him, scratching outlines with a bone pick.

“Bull?”

“Not bull.”

It is bigger even than the aurochs, glimpsed deep in woods on the low lands.

She scratches in huge ears, hints of shaggy hairs on the flanks, adds tusks, croaks the name in her own tongue. The boy repeats it, with mounting excitement.

On the flank now she draws the shape of a heart, colours it with pinches of reddish ash from her fire, makes spear-casting gestures for the boy to mimic. An urge grips him to dance round the sketch, stabbing at the heart, in the high-stepping dance of men before a hunt. She chants him on, a hoarse rhythm, clapping in time.

They had been alone in the shelter, under the escarpment, that day. A good day. Old Mother, succour of waifs, her cackle of pleasure. Her old-woman reek. *Mammurak*, she had said, *mammurak*.

“Boy, what are you doing?”

He fled, down the slope, stones pelting past as he ducked and wove.

Blows. An old woman's wails. Men, the beaters, punishers, strong hunters, stealthily back by the fireside in their strength, thighs gory, arms and arm-hairs clammy from the gralloch and the huntside feast of kidney fat and offal. They exulted. Together they had overcome the bull, the solitary of the deep woods. Their kill made them one being, limbs moving in unison, a single tireless file, as tireless as the bull hunted down, hewn into cuts and borne to the shelter for the feasting.

Beyond the firelight, round the shelter walls, huddled the women, children clutching tresses, holding on to fur tatters, groping to suckle. Tonight there would be meat for all, bones to gnaw, whole collops even from the hissing and sizzling in fire-crone's hearth. Delicious smells filled the air, well-being lulled the hunters sprawled round the fire, the seven sires, their clouts cast aside in the warmth.

When he judges the hunters have gorged themselves into a drowse, or disappeared beyond the firelight with a woman, the boy creeps back, stomach twitching at the roast smells.

"Boy."

He flattens himself, the small threatened animal.

"Boy. Here!" It is Blueface, so called from a birthmark across his jowls. He is not the worst. The boy senses this summons means no harm.

"Boy, what were you doing?"

"Dancing."

"Dancing what?"

"Dancing *mammurak*."

"What, dancing a what?"

"A *mammurak*." The boy sees the old woman looking up at him from her grovel amid the ashes at the word, her word.

"Bah."

Her girlhood, the land over the hills, land of herds and plenty. No maid had fetched more spear-points, antlers engraved with tiny deer entwined, the does of the women-spirits, than she at the great meet of the tribes that year.

This the boy would remember. Remember the mammoths. Her. She who had known his mother before her death, who knew his mother had called him Urrell.

He waited till it was safe to crawl in and sidle past the hunters sprawling gluttoned with meat from their kill. Scraps abounded. Gnawn bones, crackling, half-eaten lumps of meat lay in the rubbish of the shelter floor, food galore for a waif. No-one bothered him. The women had ceased bickering over their share of the feast and nursed infants, groomed one another, nipped lice, rubbed berry juices on their faces and breasts. Newest among them, barely older than himself, a girl was streaking dye in bars across her cheeks; berries threaded her hair, a foreign custom. Under her loose cape the boy glimpsed young breasts, rounder, paler than other women's.

This would be fire-crone's last year. The men had spoken. When the time to trek came, as the cold began, she would stay by her hearth. Another would carry the fire-log. Food would be left for her. By next spring, the shelter floor would have been picked clean. Only the black patch of charcoal and ashes would be there, ready. Thus it had always been.

The boy knew. She knew.

That summer the boy wandered further, stayed away longer, unheeded. He knapped his own flints, fire-hardened his own spears, and practised with a cast-off spear-thrower as he had seen hunters do. His strength was not enough yet to hurl a full-sized javelin. The old woman watched him whenever they were alone, pleasure creasing her wizened face. When sinews parted she helped

him twine new ones. One day she reached under her rags and pulled a kind of necklace, black with age, over her head. It was threaded in a sort of string, something unknown to the boy who knew only plaited thongs. Perhaps it was a keepsake from her girlhood, or a trade swap. The cord was unbreakable, a true material for binding. The boy's surprise over its strength gratified the old woman.

“Where from?”

“From plant.” She uttered a name that meant nothing to him.

As she had drawn the mammoth for him, he said, “Draw for me.”

On a shoulder-blade bone she outlined in charcoal a small plant he recognised immediately.

“You gather. Put in water.” With effort she described to the boy how to ret fibres from the plants by steeping them in water, then twine them into cord, skills recollected from her girlhood, skills for which no words existed in the boy's language.

With interest, almost a passionate desire to learn, the boy carried out her instructions, delighting the old woman. He waited till the hunters and the women were out foraging to bring his ill-twisted yarn to her. She showed him how to ravel it on a wimble she made for him with sticks bound together, then how to tighten the strands into an unbreakable cord. Her fingers followed movements taught them many years ago when she had learnt to braid fibres and mammoth hairs into cords and bindings for the hunters of her tribe. The boy saw her face grow young as her fingers took her back in distance and in time, tears smearing the grime of her cheeks, although she was not being beaten.

She told the boy tales of her folk, how great beasts roamed her land, some with stripes and fangs, strange horns, woolly flanks, and of huge bears that did not flee from hunters as did those of these valleys.

He knew this must be so when he found an engraving on a rockface high up the valley where birds nested. He was stealing eggs. It was the outline of a bear, faint under the lichens. He scraped it clean, excitement mounting as he revealed the top of the head, the little ears, a humped back graven to show the bear lumbering away into the past. His shoulders trembled. A quivering inside him. He placed berries in a crevice as offerings, with a perfect spearhead in red flint he had found and kept as a charm. This for the bear.

Father bear. Old bear. His secret bear.

In his search for nests – eggs and nestlings, delicious morsels – he sometimes found wild hives in clefts and looted them in a frenzy of honey-lust, an orgy for the sweetness found in nothing else, a lust which led hunters to scale cliffs and risk swirling swarms of bees that sent them to their deaths below. Bees that women clapped to their limbs to cure aches, and to their bellies to quicken with child.

Untaught, the boy learnt to follow a single bee till it led him to its hive. Often his patience ended at a cranny or hole too deep to pillage, thus he learnt the wisdom of this best of flies.

He roamed ever farther afield, nothing and no-one holding him back. He lived off the food of summer – berries, grubs, nests, nuts, fungus. He stalked does in the hope of tracing their fawns. Once he found one, lying still in the bracken, a few hours old. It fed him for several days, raw, the surplus flesh wrapped in the pelt. The kill made him feel manly, a hunter, although larger game ignored him, busy grazing, browsing, fattening ahead of the rut and winter survival. Herds might look up, shift uneasily, then settle back to eating, sensing this lone manling was no threat.

He was several days easy travel from the bear engraving when he reached the head of the valley. Here the escarpments closed in

from both sides. Where they met, a long thin waterfall spattered down, little more than a snail's trail as seen from a distance. This was the source of the brook he knew so well as it tumbled down his valley, past the cave shelter and wound down to the lowlands and the far-off sea. When he reached the foot of the fall he lay and drank, startling small fishes in the deep green water. He savoured the cool, damp air under the ferns and hanging plants of the wet rock-face.

The boy looked up at the fall. It led on and up. On impulse, he started to climb. A jumble of boulders brought down by centuries of spates blocked his way. Among and between them he squirmed, spears in one hand, bag over his shoulder, lithe as the lizards he startled but did not stop to snatch. Beyond the rockfall his way rose clearer, less impenetrable than it appeared from below, beckoning him on. The waterfall itself helped: ice and snowmelt had cut steps where the rocks were softer, forming pools from which the water spilled cascading to the next level.

Water-fowl, unused to men, scarcely heeded him; smaller birds called warnings at this intruder crossing from one side to the other in search of the easiest way up. They darted from overhanging banks where eroded roots hung, ideal places, as the boy knew, for streamside birds to sling their nests among the rootlets, beyond the reach of egg-thieves. Against his instinct he ignored them, impelled by desire to reach the top.

His climb lasted till early afternoon. He surfaced, at the hottest hour, on a scene new to him: an undulating moor. It stretched as far as he could see. Beyond, so remote as to dissolve in a haze, ran a range of mountains, from one side of the world to the other.

Fire-crone's mountains, land of mammoths.

He set off at a trot towards them, his feet springing on the moorgrass and the ling.

As he went, the boy stunned lizards sunning themselves on stones; or spied on the flight of moorland fowl to guess where their nests lay cupped in the tussocks and heather. This way he found clutches of good-sized eggs that he ate on the spot, fresh or half-hatched, crunching them as he crunched the lizards, scarcely pausing in his onward trot.

By nightfall, the long sundown of summer, he was far into the moor, drawn towards those mountains that lured him on, ever-receding into their haze. That night he curled up in a hollow, snuggling into a patch of bracken, and slept with the immediacy of an animal, safe in this open land of wheeling hawks, moor fowl, hares and silence.

Three days he travelled, in a relentless line towards the mountains, never coming nearer, till late in the third afternoon the light changed as though after rain and the air grew transparent. His eager eyes could see snow on the summits and shoulders of the vast range, but what excited him most were the streaks of ice, huge glaciers, reaching down the valleys. *Land of ice even in the summer time. Old Mother's girlhood homeland. She who had drawn him a mammoth.*

He pressed on now. The hot weather continued. Trying to reach water in a peat pool he sank into a moss-hag and only by dint of crossing his spears on firmer tussocks and spreading his slight weight was he able to wriggle to safety over the quaking slime. Thenceforth the boy sought water in stony outcrops where sometimes small pools formed in hollows of rocks, tiny inland seas for water-boatmen to navigate and dive in fright as his face appeared above them.

On one such outcrop he chanced on a hawk's nest and stole the nestling's meal, a half-eaten hare, and was pursued and bombed by an enraged parent bird as he scurried away gnawing his prize.

Perhaps the fifth, perhaps the sixth day the moorland ended

abruptly so that the boy found himself, soon after sunrise, high on the rim of an escarpment, higher than his home one and no longer overlooking a valley and familiar brook but unbroken forest in every direction. These trees were darker than his home ones, his mixed woodlands, for these were conifers. To right and left, as far as he could see, the scarp ran unbroken.

He sat on his hunkers in the buzz of summer insects, the sunlight slanting from his left side as he waited to know which way to go. No wish to turn back welled up. That much he knew.

Far beyond the vast forest, no nearer now than when he had set out, rose the mountains. He waited for an impulse to guide him onwards, as a grazing herd drifts one way or the other, or a beast of prey slinks this way or that, following no plan, yet ready to bolt or spring when the need arises.

The boy waited. He knew he would go on, but which way? He knew too that the summer warmth was short and the buzz of insects would be cut almost overnight as the long iceland winter covered the land. To be caught in that cold meant death. Strong hunters seldom survived a winter alone. All this the boy knew but it was not on his mind at present as his eyes focussed, alert to the slightest signs of movement, his hearing quickened to catch the least untoward sound, each helping his flared nostrils to sense what might be alive and stirring in the forest below. Out on the open moors he had felt safe; down there he would not.

He gathered his spears, his satchel holding spare flints, scraps of food, the trinkets a boy collects and keeps through his boyhood, and set off to his right.

He had gone a day and a half along the rim with no way down, and no sign of anything to tempt him down, when he saw what seemed like wisps of smoke rising from among trees below. There he settled for the night, comforted that perhaps humans existed down in the woods. He ate berries and bivouacked under briars and bracken

above the spot, to be ready to spy further as soon as light broke.

When he awoke all signs of smoke had vanished like morning mist. The conifer canopy stretched away below him. He resumed his way along the cliff top, eating berries as he went, but moving cautiously, the carefree days on the open moors behind him. There was no knowing what the forest might conceal. Any tracker could be tracked. His boy's spears would be as much defence against hunters as a fawn's kicks against him.

Yet he felt drawn to find those people, danger or not, after so many days alone. Perhaps they knew the land of ice and mammoths.

It was a while before he found a place that led down to the forest.

The overflow from a tarn had cut a ghyll or chine down which a small beck ran. He scrambled down the incline and followed the stream till it ended at tree-top level before it tumbled over the edge into a pool below. The boy crouched, scrutinising the forest for signs of life, before daring to scale down the remaining part of the cliff. He threw his spears and satchel ahead and climbed down after them, grasping the small trees and tangle of roots that the fall of water had encouraged to grow along its margin.

Once down, his spears and pouch retrieved, he lay under the boughs of a conifer to gather his breath and to listen. There was nothing to hear. Not even the twitter of birds. He drank from the brook and backtracked in the direction of the smoke, the cliff-face now to his left. He was feeling a need for human proximity.

It was cool in the gloom of this forest, the densest he had ever seen. He travelled by instinct, trotting along the pine-needle floor, among these endless trees. There would be little to eat here, few clearings for raspberries, bilberries, little by way of recognisable fungus, and no game that he could sense.