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recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
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The events in this book take place about forty thousand years ago, in a time when mammoths could walk across the area now covered by the North Sea, and the people were of the kind we now call Neanderthals.

Chapter 1

It was coming. The blustering wind was covering up the sound of the beast's great feet, but the whole valley had begun to shudder with fear. With dread.

Mica tightened her grip on her axe. The flint edge was sharp, but the creature's flesh was so thick that her blade would do no more than enrage it, turn it to the attack. And a single swipe of its—

There! A shrill whistle: and there, over on the other side of the track, a sharp *tk!* in reply.

Mica shifted cautiously as she crouched amongst the long tufts of grass. Those sounds had not been made by birds, but by stonemen. The beast must be very close, now. The whistle had been Elk's order: *be ready*, and the tongue-click had been Seal's answer.

This was the hardest part of any hunt. All Mica had to do was keep absolutely still and silent while the others chivvied the beast past her and on towards the bog—but still Mica's heart was thumping in her chest.

The stonemen had surrounded the beast with small sounds: soft whistles, or tiny squeaks, or sudden

rustlings in the wind-swayed grass. They had to make the beast just uneasy enough to turn aside from its course and pace quietly on towards what it thought was safety.

There was a great huffing snort from a little way down the track. It was so close Mica nearly bolted. She wanted to run so much that she had to clench her fist round her axe to stop herself doing it.

But it was all right. Of course it was. The beast was close, but it didn't even know she was there.

Mica discovered she was shaking. This creature was so dangerous.

That was partly the reason for the hunt, of course. Elk was the Strongest of the stonemen, their chief. Getting them to kill the biggest beast they'd ever seen would prove yet again his right to be leader.

And that was why all the stonemen (except Pearl, who was too old, and Lynx, who had been born only six seasons ago) were hiding out here amongst the long grass of the snow-scabbed hillside, waiting and waiting for the terrifying moment when—

There was a sudden screeching bellow from right above her and Mica forgot everything. She pushed herself to her feet and there, in one confused, horrified moment, she saw it all.

It was so huge. So *huge*! It filled half the sky. And then faster than thought (that was the most terrifying thing, faster than *thought*) it was lashing out with its great trunk, and Seal was having to throw himself out of its way to avoid a bone-splintering blow.

Mica had never seen a beast like this so close. Nothing like this close. She could smell its rage, see the glint of its small eye, hear its coarse hair rustling in the wind.

She wanted to run, but the sight of the beast's power took all her strength away from her. She stood in full sight and gaped at it.

A mammoth. A mighty bull mammoth, close enough to—

—but now Seal had scrambled up again and he and Elk were charging towards the beast. They were bellowing, thumping their wide chests, brandishing their spears. Bear was there too, waving his arms and roaring in his new deep voice. Behind the great bulk of the beast Garnet's and Amber's voices were cutting the air, high and sharp like the cries of hawks.

Mica needed to run. Needed to run. Needed to run: but she couldn't take her eyes off the great towering bulk of the mammoth. Even Elk, even *Elk*, seemed tiny beside it.

Garnet was running screeching into the path of the beast. It saw her and swerved, and then it was running, too, straight towards Mica: and though Mica tried to move, tried to throw herself aside, her legs refused to obey her.

There were shouts from all round:

'*Mica!*'

'*Mica, run!*'

But Mica's body was frozen, and—

'*Mica!*'

Bear was charging towards her through the rough grass, and the sight of his horror-filled face made Mica's mind suddenly snap clear.

Run. *Run!*

She turned, got somehow caught up in a clump of grass and all at once she was rolling, rolling, with the sky and earth tumbling round her.

And suddenly the huge bulk of the beast was above her, blotting out the sun. Somewhere someone was shouting something but she couldn't tell what it was.

This must be the end. It must be. Any moment now it would trample her, crush her bones.

Despite her terror Mica somehow got to her feet again. She held up her flint axe in both hands and screamed out a shrill and desperate defiance.

But she was hardly more than a gnat to it. It swiped her out of its way with its trunk and Mica went flying.

Mid-flight, the sun went out.

Chapter 2

Mica opened her eyes and found she was outside on the hills. She was lying twisted awkwardly through the tussocks of the wind-whipped grass. Her head was thudding horribly. What on earth . . .

The mammoth! It had been right above her, and then . . .

The valley was quiet, now, except for the murmur of busy voices, and the sound of axes slicing through flesh.

A shape appeared against the pearly sky above her.

'Are you all right?' asked Bear, anxiously.

Mica wasn't sure. She tried to sit up, but the movement sent the snow-scraped hills lurching so violently round her that she wouldn't have made it if Bear hadn't caught hold of her arm to steady her.

Bear's hand was filthy with scabs of dark blood. Yes, the stink of blood was everywhere. The breeze was thick with it.

Mica looked round and there was the mammoth, just a handful of paces away. It was dead, surrounded

by ice-splinters and half sunken into the reed-pierced bog.

So they'd killed it. The stonemen had stampeded it into the mire and then speared it while it was panicking and floundering and sinking into the mud.

They'd killed it!

Elk and the others were busy round its body. There was need for haste because the stench of blood would soon attract hyenas and lions. There was meat enough in this great corpse to feed all the beasts of the valley, of course, but only a fool argued with a lion if he could help it.

In any case, winter was coming and the stonemen needed every scrap of meat they could get if they were going to survive to see the spring.

Mica let Bear help her to her feet. The corpse of the mammoth looked mountainous, even half sunk into the bog. Mica shivered at the sight of it.

'We nearly lost it,' Bear told her. 'It was headed off up the slope, but you turned it aside just at the last moment.'

'Did Elk spear it?' The first spear-thrust was Elk's duty because he was the leader of the stonemen, their Strongest.

Bear hesitated.

'I stabbed its eye, first,' he said, blushing a little.

Mica stared at him.

'You . . . '

'Well, it was near getting out of the bog.'

'But how on earth . . . '

'I stepped up on its tusk. Got hold of its ear. Stabbed it with my axe.'

Mica gaped at him. The thought of Bear jumping up onto that great roaring, lashing creature. Of grabbing hold of its flapping ear . . .

'That was crazy, Bear,' she said, at last.

He shrugged, frowning.

'The others finished it off,' he said. 'Mica—'

But Mica had just realized something else. Bear had struck the first blow. So that meant the mammoth was Bear's kill.

She looked at him.

'You are grown-up,' she said, really shocked at the thought.

He blushed even more deeply.

'I only stabbed its eye. I don't know if that will count.'

But of course it would count. Of course it would. So that meant Bear was grown-up. Mica could hardly believe it. They'd been friends forever: but now Bear was grown-up and that meant everything would be different.

'Mica,' said Bear, 'there's something else. The mammoth—it fought back. Both spears were broken.'

Mica forgot all about Bear's being grown-up: she went cold with horror.

'*Both?* Broken badly?'

'One halfway along. The other in three pieces.'

But their spears were vital. The river brought them

pieces of wood quite often, but seldom anything long enough or straight enough to make a spear.

'But how will we hunt without spears?' she asked, stupidly.

Bear pulled his heavy wolf-pelt up over his shoulder. The bindings that held them in place had come loose in the hunt.

'We'll have to hide in the grass and hope some beasts come along,' he said, unhappily. 'We have our axes.'

But that was ridiculous. No good at all. Their spears were vital. *Vital*. There were eight mouths to feed, and winter was coming, and they weren't going to be able to kill anything of any size with a hand-axe. You'd be taking your life in your hands trying to kill even a *horse* with a hand-axe.

Down by the edge of the bog Elk was hard at work slitting his way into the mammoth's hump. The hump would be full of fat, valuable for both eating and fuel. The beast's trunk had already been cut off and lay ready to drag back to the shelter, and now Seal and Garnet were hacking with their hand-axes at one of the beast's great legs. The meat from a mammoth's leg was almost as good to eat as the trunk, though it would take all Seal's great strength to drag the thing home.

Elk beckoned to her, his eyes bright under his brow-ridge. His face was shining with mammoth grease and the joy of the kill.

'Come, then! Come, Mica, if you're all in one piece!

We must be busy. We don't want hyenas to get this, do we. O*r* those sneaking lions.'

We must be busy was Elk's motto, and of course he was right. Here was meat, and winter was on its way, and the leaves of the little birch shrubs had long whirled up into the cloudy sky. Even if their spears had not been broken, every mouthful of meat would have been very precious.

Mica clambered cautiously over the partly submerged corpse of the great beast. She settled her axe in her hand, pulled the beast's long hair out of the way, and began to hack as hard as she could at its other foreleg.