

Icebones

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MAMMOTH Book 3: Icebones

Icebones was cold.

She was trapped in chill darkness. She couldn't feel her legs, her tail, even her trunk. She could hear nothing, see nothing.

She tried to call out to her mother, Silverhair, by rumbling, trumpeting, stamping. She couldn't even do that. It was like being immersed in thick cold mud.

And the cold was deep, deeper than she had ever known, soaking into the core of her body, reaching the warm centre under her layers of hair and fat and flesh and bone, the core heat every mammoth had to protect, all her life.

Perhaps this was the aurora, where mammoths believed their souls rose when they died.

...But, she thought resentfully, she was only fifteen years old. She had never mated, never borne a calf. How could she have died?

Besides, much was wrong. The aurora was full of light, but there was no light here. The aurora was full of the scent of growing grass, but there was no scent here.

And things were changing.

She had been – asleep – and now she was awake. That had changed.

She recalled a time before this darkness, when she had been with Silverhair. They had walked across the cold steppe of the Island, surrounded by the Lost and their incomprehensible gadgetry, perturbed and yet not harmed by them. She recalled what her mother had been saying: 'You will be a Matriarch some day, little Icebones. You will be the greatest of them all. But responsibility will lie heavily on you ...' Icebones hadn't understood.

With her mother, then, on the Island. Now here. Change. A time asleep. Now, awake in the dark. Change, change, change.

Everyone knew that in the aurora nothing changed. In the aurora mammoths gathered in the calm warm presence of Kilukpuk, immersed in Family, and there was no day or night, no hunger or thirst, no I: merely a continual, endless moment of belonging.

This was not the aurora. I am not dead, she realised. My long walk continues.

But with life came hope and fear, and dread settled on her.

She made the lost cry, like a calf. But she couldn't even hear that.

Thunder cracked. Light flashed in sharp lines above and below her. She felt a shuddering, deep in her belly, as if the ground itself was stirring.

She tried to retreat, to rumble her alarm, but still she could not move.

The close darkness receded. Great hard sheets of blackness, like dark ice, fell away. She was suddenly immersed in pink-red light.

And now the feeling returned to her legs and trunk, belly and back, all in a rush. It was like being drenched suddenly in ice water. She staggered, her legs stiff and remote. She tried to trumpet, but her trunk was heavy, and a thick, briny liquid gushed out of it, like sea water.

When her nostrils were clear she took a deep, shuddering breath. The air was cold and sharp – and thin. It made her gasp, hurting her raw lungs. Her weak eyes prickled, suddenly streaming with salty water. But she rejoiced, for she was whole again, immersed in her body, and the world.

But it was not the world she had known.

The sky was pink, like a dawn, or a sunset.

She was standing on a shallow slope. She ran her soft trunk tip over the ground. It was hard smooth rock, blue-red. Its surface was rippled and lobed, as if it had melted and refrozen.

This broad plain of rock descended as far as she could see, all the way to the horizon. She must be standing on the flank of a giant mountain, she thought. She turned to look up towards the summit, and she saw a great pillar of black smoke thrusting up to the sky, billows caught in their motion as if frozen.

Her patch of rock, soiled by her watery vomit, was surrounded by sheets of dense blackness that lay on the ground. When she touched this black stuff, she found it was hard and cold and lacking in scent and taste, quite unlike the rock in its chilling smoothness. And the sheets had sharp, straight edges. It was the crust of darkness that had contained her when she had woken from her strange Sleep, and it filled her with renewed dread.

She stepped reluctantly over the smooth black sheets, until she had reached the comparative comfort of the solid rock. But the rock's lobes and ridges were hard under her feet, and every time she took a step she had a strange, dream-like sensation of floating.

Nothing grew here: no herbs, no trees. There was nothing to eat, not so much as a blade of grass.

The air stank of smoke and sulphur. The sun was small and dim and shrunken, as if very far away. The ground shuddered, as if some immense beast buried there were snoring softly in its sleep.

I am in a strange place indeed, she thought. Her brief euphoria evaporated, and disorientation and fear returned.

A contact rumble reached her, resonating deep in her belly. She was not alone: relief flooded her.

She turned sharply. Pain prickled in her knees and back and neck and in the pads of her feet.

A mammoth was approaching – a Bull, taller than she was.

As he walked his powerful shoulders rose and fell, and his head nodded and swayed, his trunk a tangible weight that pulled at his neck. His underfur was light brown, but yellow-white around his rump and belly. His tough overlying guard hairs were much darker, nearly black on his rump and flanks, but shading to a deep brown flecked with crimson on his forequarters. The hairs that dangled from his trunk and chin and feet were paler, in places almost white. His tusks curled before him, heavy and proud. He walked slowly, languidly, as if dazed or ill.

She could see him only dimly, through air laden with mist and smoke. But she could smell the deep warmth of his layered hair, feel the steady press of his footsteps against the hard ground.

He was *mammuthus primigenius*: a woolly mammoth, as she was.

She didn't know him.

The two of them began to growl and stomp, facing each other and turning away, touching tusks and trunks, even emitting high, bird-like chirrup from their trunks. The pink moist tip of his trunk reached out and explored her mouth, scalp and eyes. She ran her own trunk fingers through his long guard hairs, finding the woolly underfur beneath.

In this way, touching and singing and listening and smelling, the two mammoths shared a complex, rich exchange of information.

'...Who are you? Where are you from?'

'My name is Icebones -'

'Do you know where the food is? We're all hungry here.'

She stumbled back, confused. He was hard to understand, his sounds and postures and gestures a distortion of the language she was used to, as if he had come from a different Clan, not related to her own. And his manner was strange – eager, clumsy, more befitting a callow calf than a grown Bull.

She realised immediately, he is frightened.

Discreetly she probed the area of his temple between his eyes and his small ears where he would secrete musth fluid, if it was his time. But she found nothing.

'I don't know anything about food.'

He growled. 'But you came out of that.' He probed at the black sheets around her.

She didn't know what to say to him.

Baffled, disturbed, she stepped forward, ignoring the continuing stiffness in her legs, and walked down the featureless slope. The Bull followed her, demanding food noisily, like a calf pursuing his mother.

She reached a shallow ridge. She paused there, raised her trunk and sniffed, studying the world.

She saw how this Mountain's vast shadow spilled across the rocky plains below. Looking beyond the shadow to where the land was still sunlit, she saw splashes of grey-green – steppe, perhaps, or forest. And beyond that she saw the broad shoulders of two more vast, shallow mountains, pushing above the horizon, mighty twins of the Mountain under her feet, made grey and colourless by distance and mist. Close to the horizon thin clouds glowed, bright blue, stark against the pink sky.

There was a moon in the sky. But it was not the Moon, which had floated above the night lands of the Island. This moon was a small white disc, and it was climbing into the smoky sky as she watched – visibly moving, moment by moment, with a strange, disturbing speed. As it climbed, approaching the sun, it turned into a crescent, a cup of darkness, that finally disappeared.

And then the moon's shadow passed over the sun itself, a dark spot like a passing cloud.

Icebones cringed.

With her deep mammoth's senses she could hear the songs of the planet: the growl of earthquakes and volcanoes, the howl of wind and thunder, the angry surge of ocean storms, all the noises of earth, air, fire and water. And she could tell that this world was small, round, hard – and strange.

She raised her trunk higher, trying to smell mammoths, her Family, Silverhair. She could smell nothing but the stink of sulphur and ash.

Wherever she was, however she had got here, she was far from her Family. Without her Family she was incomplete – for a mammoth Cow could no more live apart from her Family than a trunk or leg or tusk could survive if cut off the body.

The Bull continued to pursue her.

She turned on him. 'Why are you following me? I am not in oestrus. Can't you tell that? And you are not in musth.'

His eyes gleamed, amber pebbles in pits of wrinkled skin. 'What is oestrus? What is musth?'

She growled. 'My name is Icebones. What is your name? Where is your bachelor herd?'

'Do you know where the food is? Please, I am very hungry.'

She came closer to him, curiosity warring with her anger and confusion. She explored his face with her trunk. How could he know so little? How could he not have a name?

And – where was she? This strange place of pink mountains was like nowhere she had ever heard of, nowhere spoken of even in the Cycle, the mammoths' great and ancient body of lore...

Nowhere, except one place.

'The Sky Steppe. That's where we are, isn't it?' The Sky Steppe, the Island in the sky where – according to the Cycle – mammoths would one day find a world of their own, far from the predations and cruelty of the Lost, a world of calm and plenty.

But this place of barren rock and smoky air didn't seem so plentiful to her, and nor was it calm.

The Bull ignored her questions. 'I'm hungry,' he repeated.

She turned her back on him deliberately.

She heard him grunt and snort, the soft uncertain pads of his footsteps recede. She felt relief – then renewed anxiety.

I'm hungry too, she realised. And I'm thirsty. And, after all, the strange, infuriating Bull was the only mammoth she had seen here.

She turned. His broad back, long guard hairs shining, was still visible over a blue-black ridge that poked like a bone out of the hard ground.

She hurried after him.

Walking was difficult. The hard ground crumpled into great folds, as if it had once flowed like congealing ice, and great gullies had been raked out of the side of the Mountain.

Her strength seemed sapped. She struggled to climb the ridges, and slithered on her splayed feet down slopes where she could not get a purchase. The air was smoky and thin, and her chest heaved at it.

She found a gully that was roofed over by a layer of rock. She probed with brief curiosity into a kind of cave, much taller than she was, that receded into the darkness like a vast nostril. Perhaps all the gullies here had once been long tubular caves like this, but their rocky roofs had collapsed.

In one place the ground had cracked open, like burned skin, and steam billowed. Mud, grey and liquid, boiled inside the crack, and it built up tall, skinny vents, like trunks sticking out of the ground. The air around the mud pool was hot and dense with smoke and ash, making it even harder to draw a breath.

Grit settled on her eyes, making them weep. She longed for the soft earth of the Island in summer, for grass and herbs and bushes.

But the Bull was striding on, his gait still languidly slow to her eyes. He was confident, used to the vagaries of the ground where she was uncertain, healthy and strong where she still felt stiff and disoriented. She hurried after him.

And now, as she came over a last ridge, she saw that he had joined a group of mammoths.

They were all Cows, she saw instantly. She felt a surge of relief to see a Family here – even if it was not her Family. She hurried forward, trumpeting a greeting.

They turned, sniffing the air. The mammoths stood close together, and the wind made their long guard hairs swirl around them in a single wave, like a curtain of falling water.

There were three young-looking Cows, so similar they must have been sisters. One appeared to be carrying a calf: her belly was heavy and low, and her dugs were swollen. An older Cow might have been their mother – her posture was tense and uncertain – and a still older Cow, moving stiffly as if her bones ached, might be her mother, grandmother to the sisters – and so, surely, the Matriarch of the Family. Icebones thought they all seemed agitated, uncertain.

Icebones watched as the Cow she had tagged as the mother lumbered over to the Bull and cuffed his scalp affectionately with her trunk... And the mother towered over the Bull.

That didn't make sense, Icebones thought, bewildered. Adult Bulls were taller than Cows. This Bull had been much taller than Icebones – and Icebones, at fifteen years old, was nearly her full adult height. So how could this older Cow tower over him as if he was a calf?

There was one more Cow here, Icebones saw now, standing a little way away from the clustered Family. This Cow was different. Her hair was very fine – so fine that in places Icebones could see her skin, which was pale grey, mottled pink. Her tusks were short and straight, lacking the usual curling sweep of mammoth tusks, and her ears were large and floppy.

This Cow was staring straight at Icebones as she approached, her trunk held high as she sniffed the air. Her posture was hard and still, as if she were a musth Bull challenging a younger rival.

'I am Icebones, daughter of Silverhair,' she said.

The others did not reply. She walked forward.

The mammoths seemed to grow taller and taller, their legs extending like shadows cast by a setting sun, until they loomed over her, as if she too was reduced to the dimensions of a calf.

Icebones felt reluctant, increasingly nervous. Must everything be strange here?

She approached the grandmother. Though she too was much taller than Icebones, this old one's hair was discoloured black and grey and her head was lean, the skin and hair sunken around her eyes and temples, so that the shape of the skull was clearly visible. Icebones reached out and slipped her trunk into the grandmother's mouth, and tasted staleness and blood. She is very old, Icebones realised with dismay.

She said, 'You are the Matriarch. My Matriarch is Silverhair. But my Family is far from here ...'

'Matriarch,' said the grandmother. 'Family.' She gazed at Icebones with eyes like pebbles. 'These are old words, words buried deep in our heads, our bellies. I am no Matriarch, child.'

Icebones was confused. 'Every Family has a Matriarch.'

The grandmother growled. 'This is my daughter. These are her children, these three Cows. And this one carries a calf of her own – another generation, if I live to see it... But we are not a Family.' She sneezed, her limp trunk flexing, and blood-stained mucus splashed over the rock at her feet.

Icebones shrank back. 'I never heard of mammoths without names, a Family that wasn't a Family, Cows without a Matriarch.'

One of the three tall sisters approached Icebones curiously. Her tusks were handsome symmetrical spirals before her face. Her legs were skinny and extended. Even her head was large, Icebones saw, the delicate skull expansive above the fringe of hair that draped down from her chin.

She reached out with her trunk and probed at Icebones's hair and mouth and ears, just as if Icebones was a calf. 'I know who you are.'

Icebones recoiled.

But now the others were all around her – the other sisters, the mother, the Bull.

'We were told you would come.'

'I am thirsty. I want water.'

'My baby is stirring. I am hungry -'

The strange, tall mammoths clamoured at her, like calves seeking dugs to suckle, plucking at the hair on her back and legs, even the clumps on her stubby tail.

She trumpeted, backing away. 'Get away from me!'

The other – the Ragged One, stub-tusked, pink-spotted – came lumbering over the rocky slope to stand close to Icebones. 'You mustn't mind them. They think you might be the Matriarch, you see. That's what they've been promised.'

Now the Bull-calf came loping towards her, oddly slow, ungainly. He said to Icebones, 'Show us how to find food. That's what Matriarchs are supposed to do.'

I'm no Matriarch, she thought. I've never even had a calf. I've never mated. I'm little older than you are, for all your size... 'You must find food for yourself,' she said.

'But he can't,' the Ragged One said slyly. 'Let me show you.'

And she turned and began to follow a trail, lightly worn into the hard rock, that led over a further ridge.

Confused, apprehensive, Icebones followed.

The Ragged One brought her to a great shallow pit that had been sliced into the flank of the Mountain. At the back of the pit was a vertical wall, like a cliff face, into which sockets had been cut, showing dark and empty spaces beyond.

And, strangest of all, on a raised outcrop at the centre of the levelled floor stood a mammoth – but it was not a mammoth. It, he or she, was merely a heap of bones,

painstakingly reassembled to mimic life, with not a scrap of flesh or fat or hair. The naked skeleton raised great yellow tusks challengingly to the pink sky.

Icebones recognised the nature of this place immediately: the harsh straight lines and level planes of its construction, the casual horror of the bony monument at the centre. 'This is a place of the Lost,' she said. 'We should get away from here.'

The Ragged One gazed at her with eyes that were too orange, too bright. 'You really don't understand, do you? The Lost aren't the problem. The problem is, the Lost have gone.' She circled her trunk around Icebones's, and began to tug her, gently but relentlessly, towards the shallow, open pit.

Icebones walked forward, one heavy step after another, straining to detect the presence of the Lost. But her sense of smell was scrambled by the stink of the smoky air.

'Where were you born?'

'On the Island,' Icebones said. 'A steppe. A land of grass and bushes and water.'

The Ragged One growled. 'Your Island, if it ever existed, is long ago and far away. Here – this is where I was born. And my mother before me – and her mother – and hers. Here, in this place of the Lost. What do you think of that?'

Icebones looked up at the cavernous rooms cut into the wall. 'And was a Lost your Matriarch? Did the Lost give you your names?'

'We had no Matriarch,' the Ragged One said simply. 'We had no need of Families. We had no need of names. For we only had to do what the Lost showed us, and we would be kept well and happy. Look.' The Ragged One stalked over to a low trough set in the sheer wall. A flap of shining stone dangled before it, like the curtain of guard hairs beneath the belly of a mammoth. The Ragged One pushed the tip of her trunk under the flap, which lifted up. When she withdrew her trunk, she held it up before Icebones. Save for a little dust, her pink trunk tip was empty.

Icebones was baffled by this mysterious behaviour. And she saw that the trunk had just a single nostril.

The Ragged One said, 'Every day since I was born I came to this place and pushed my trunk in the hole, and was rewarded with food. Grass, herbs, bark, twigs. Every day. And from other holes in this wall I have drawn water to drink – as much as I like. But not today, and not for several days.'

'How can food grow in a hole?'

The old grandmother came limping towards them, her gaunt head heavy. 'It doesn't grow there, child. The Lost put it there with their paws.'

'And now,' the Ragged One said, 'the Lost are gone. All of them. And so there is no more food in the hole, no more water. Now can you see why we are frightened?'

The old one, with a weary effort, lifted her trunk and laid it on Icebones's scalp. 'I don't know who you are, or where you came from. But we have a legend. One day the Lost would leave this place, and the great empty spaces of this world would be ours. And on that day, one would come who would lead us, and show us how to live: how to eat, how to drink, how to survive the heat of the summer and the cold of the winter.'

'A Matriarch,' Icebones said softly.

The grandmother murmured, 'It has been a very long time – more generations than there are stars in the sky. So they say ...'

'But now,' the Ragged One said slyly, 'the Lost are gone, and we are hungry. Are you to be our Matriarch, Icebones?'

Icebones lifted her trunk from one to the other. The grandmother seemed to be gazing at her expectantly, as if with hope – but there was only envy and ambition in the stance of the Ragged One.

'I am no Matriarch,' she said.

The Ragged One

snorted contempt. 'Then must we die here? ...'

Her words were drowned by a roar louder than any mammoth's. The ground shuddered sharply under Icebones's feet, and she stumbled.

Dark smoke thrust out of the higher slopes of the Mountain. The great black column was shot through with fire, and lumps of burning rock flew high. The air became thick and dark, full of the stink of sulphur, and darkness fell over them.

'Ah,' said the Ragged One, as if satisfied. 'This old monster is waking up at last.'

Flakes of ash were falling through the muddy air, like snowflakes, settling on the mammoths' outer hair. It was a strange, distracting sight. Icebones caught one flake on her trunk tip. It was hot enough to burn, and she flicked it away.

A mammoth trumpeted, piercingly.

Icebones hurried back, trying to ignore the sting of ash flakes on her exposed skin, and the stink of her own singed hair.

She met a mammoth, running in panic. It was one of the three sisters, and the long hairs that dangled from her belly were smouldering. 'Help me! Oh, help me!' Even as she ran, Icebones was struck by the liquid slowness of her gait, the languid way her hair flopped over her face.

The injured one, confused, agitated, ran back to the others. Icebones hurried after her and beat at the Cow's scorched and smouldering fur with her trunk.

The others stood around helplessly. The mammoths, coated in dirty ash, were turning grey, as if transmuting into rock themselves.

At last the smouldering was stopped. The injured Cow was weeping thick tears of pain, and Icebones saw that she would have a scarred patch on her belly.

Icebones asked, 'How did this happen to you?...'

There was a predatory howl, and light glared from the sky. The mammoths cringed and trumpeted.

A giant rock fell from the smoke-filled sky. It slammed into the floor, sending smaller flaming fragments flying far, and the ground shuddered again. Beneath a thin crust of black stone, the fallen rock was glowing red-hot.

With a clatter, the patiently reconstructed skeleton of the long-dead mammoth fell to pieces.

'That is how I was burned,' the injured sister said resentfully.

More of the lethal glowing rocks began to fall from the sky, each of them howling like a descending raptor, and where they fell the stony ground splashed like soft ice.

The mother lumbered up. 'We have to get out of this rain of rocks,' she said grimly.

'The feeding place,' gasped the injured sister.

'No,' growled the mother. 'Look.'

Icebones peered through curling smoke and the steady drizzle of ash flakes. A falling rock had smashed into the place of feeding, breaking open the thin wall as a mammoth's foot might crush a skull.

The Ragged One was watching Icebones, as if this was a trial of strength. She said slyly, 'The Lost have abandoned us. Must we all die here? Tell us what to do, Matriarch.'

Icebones, dizzy, disoriented, tried to think. Did these spindly mammoths really believe she was a Matriarch? And whatever they believed, what was she to do, in this strange upside-down world where it rained ash and fiery rock? Surely Silverhair would have known ...

The grandmother, through a trunk clogged with ash and dirt, was struggling to speak.

Her daughter stepped closer. 'What did you say?'

'The tube,' the old one said. 'The lava tube.'

The others seemed baffled, but Icebones understood. 'The great nostril of rock ... It is not far.' I should have thought of it. Silverhair would have thought of it. But I am not Silverhair. I am only Icebones.

She waited for the grandmother to give her command to proceed. But, of course, this old one was no Matriarch. The mammoths milled about, uncertain.

'We must not leave here,' said the burned sister. 'What if the Lost return? They will help us.'

At last her mother stepped forward and slapped her sharply on the scalp with her trunk. 'We must go to the lava tube. Come now.' She turned and began to lead the way. The others followed, the Bull pacing ahead with foolish boldness, the three sisters clustered together. The Ragged One tracked them at a distance, more like an adolescent Bull than a Cow.

As they toiled away into the thickening grey murk, Icebones realised that the grandmother was not following.

She turned back. To find her way she had to probe with her trunk through the murk. The smoke and ash was so thick now it was hard to breathe.

The grandmother had slumped to her knees, and her belly was flat on the ground, guard hairs trailing around her. Her eyes were closed, her trunk coiled limply before her, and her breath was a shallow laboured scratch.

'You must get up. Come on.' Icebones nudged the old one's rump with her forehead, trying to force her to stand. She trumpeted to the others. 'Help her!'

The grandmother's rumble was weak, deep, almost inaudible over the shuddering of the rocky ground. 'Let them go.' She slumped again, her breath bubbling, her body turning into a grey shapeless mound under the ash.

Icebones feverishly probed at the old one's face and mouth with her trunk. 'I will see you in the aurora.'

One eye opened, like a stone embedded in broken flesh and scorched hair. 'There is no aurora in this place, child.'

Icebones was shocked. 'Then where do we go when we die?'

The old one closed her eyes. 'I suppose I'll soon find out.' Her chest was heaving as she strained at the hot, filthy air. She raised her trunk, limply, and pushed at Icebones's face. 'Go. Your mother would be proud of you.'

Icebones backed away. She was immersed in strangeness and peril, far from her Family – and now she was confronted by death. 'I will Remember you.'

But the grandmother, subsiding as if into sleep, did not seem to hear, and Icebones turned away.

It was the greatest volcano in the solar system. It had been dormant for tens of millions of years. Now it was active once more, and its great voice could be heard all around this small world.

And, across the volcano's mighty flanks, the small band of mammoths toiled through fire and ash, seeking shelter.