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the Clan of the Cave Bear

a novel by
Jean M. Auel

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**the
Clan
of the
Cave
Bear**
a novel by
Jean M. Auel
Earth's Children



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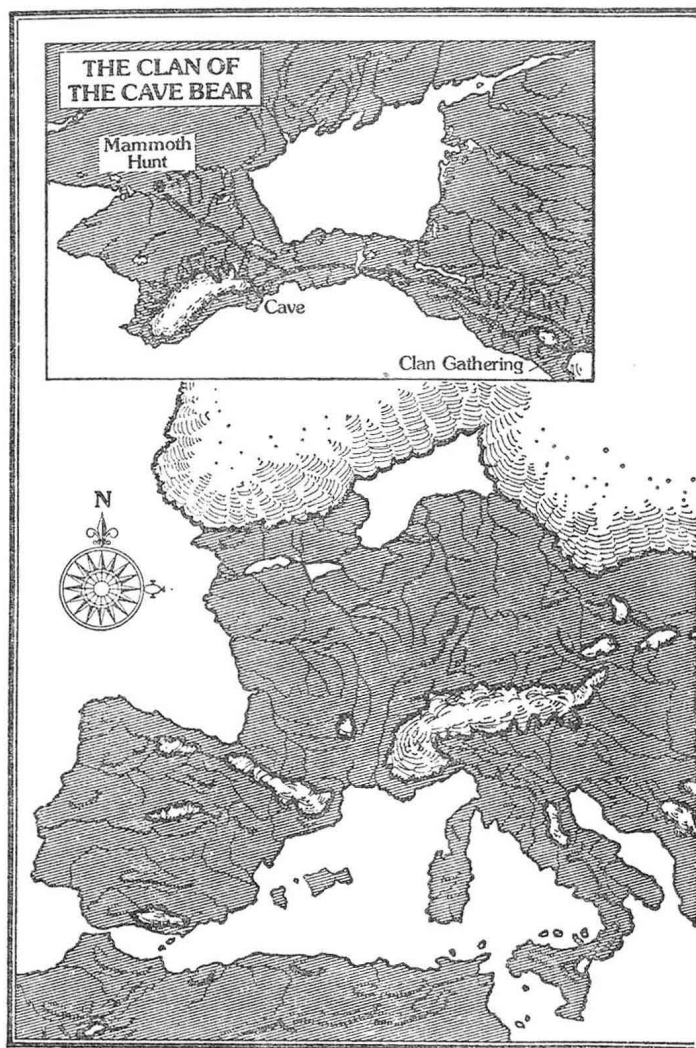
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for RAY
My worst critic
—and best friend

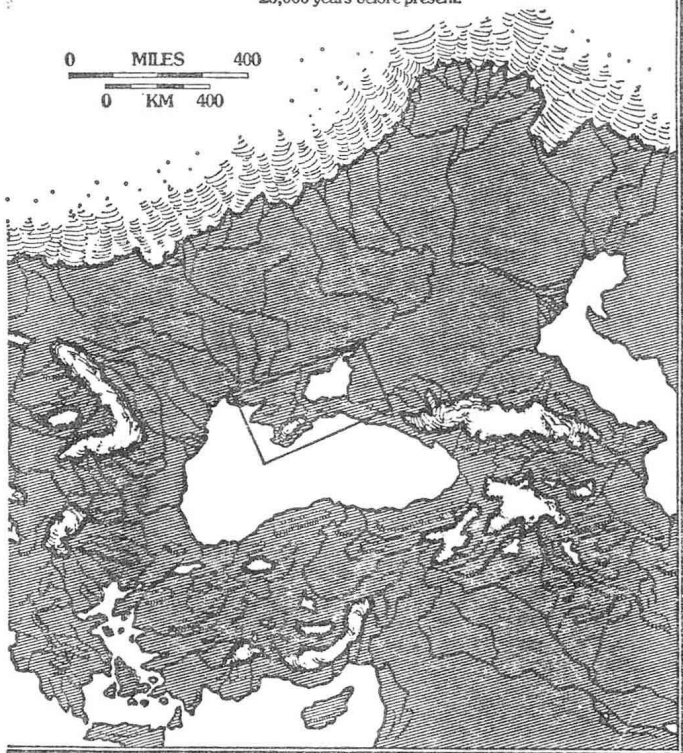


EARTH'S CHILDREN

PREHISTORIC EUROPE DURING THE ICE AGE

Extent of ice and change in coastlines during 10,000-year interstadial, a warming trend during the Würm glaciation of the late Pleistocene Epoch extending from 35,000 to 25,000 years before present.

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Acknowledgments ---

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The naked child ran out of the hide-covered lean-to toward the rocky beach at the bend in the small river. It didn't occur to her to look back. Nothing in her experience ever gave her reason to doubt the shelter and those within it would be there when she returned.

She splashed into the river and felt rocks and sand shift under her feet as the shore fell off sharply. She dived into the cold water and came up sputtering, then reached out with sure strokes for the steep opposite bank. She had learned to swim before she learned to walk and, at five, was at ease in the water. Swimming was often the only way a river could be crossed.

The girl played for a while, swimming back and forth, then let the current float her downstream. Where the river widened and bubbled over rocks, she stood up and waded to shore, then walked back to the beach and began sorting pebbles. She had just put a stone on top of a pile of especially pretty ones when the earth began to tremble.

The child looked with surprise as the stone rolled down of its own accord, and stared in wonder at the small pyramid of pebbles shaking and leveling themselves. Only then did she become aware she was shaking too, but she was still more confused than apprehensive. She glanced around, trying to understand why her universe had altered in some inexplicable way. The earth was not supposed to move.

The small river, which moments before had flowed smoothly, was roiling with choppy waves that splashed over its banks as the rocking streambed moved at cross purposes to the current, dredging mud up from the bottom. Brush close by the upstream banks quivered, animated by unseen movement at the roots, and downstream, boulders bobbed in unaccustomed agitation. Beyond them, stately conifers of the forest into which the stream flowed lurched grotesquely. A giant pine near the bank, its roots exposed and their hold weakened by the spring runoff, leaned toward the opposite

shore. With a crack, it gave way and crashed to the ground, bridging the turbid watercourse, and lay shaking on the unsteady earth.

The girl started at the sound of the falling tree. Her stomach churned and tightened into a knot as fear brushed the edge of her mind. She tried to stand but fell back, unbalanced by the sickening swaying. She tried again, managed to pull herself up, and stood unsteadily, afraid to take a step.

As she started toward the hide-covered shelter set back from the stream, she felt a low rumble rise to a terrifying roar. A sour stench of wetness and rot issued from a crack opening in the ground, like the reek of morning breath from a yawning earth. She stared uncomprehendingly at dirt and rocks and small trees falling into the widening gap as the cooled shell of the molten planet cracked in the convulsion.

The lean-to, perched on the far edge of the abyss, tilted, as half the solid ground beneath it pulled away. The slender ridgepole teetered undecidedly, then collapsed and disappeared into the deep hole, taking its hide cover and all it contained with it. The girl trembled in wide-eyed horror as the foul-breathed gaping maw swallowed everything that had given meaning and security to the five short years of her life.

"Mother! *Motherrrr!*" she cried as comprehension overwhelmed her. She didn't know if the scream ringing in her ears was her own in the thunderous roar of rending rock. She clambered toward the deep crack, but the earth rose up and threw her down. She clawed at the ground, trying to find a secure hold on the heaving, shifting land.

Then the gap closed, the roar ceased, and the shaking earth stilled, but not the child. Lying face down on the soft damp soil churned loose by the paroxysm that convulsed the land, she shook with fear. She had reason to fear.

The child was alone in a wilderness of grassy steppes and scattered forests. Glaciers spanned the continent on the north, pushing their cold before them. Untold numbers of grazing animals, and the carnivores that preyed on them, roamed the vast prairies, but people were few. She had nowhere to go and she had no one who would come and look for her. She was alone.

The ground quivered again, settling itself, and the girl heard a rumbling from the depths, as though the earth were

digesting a meal gulped in a single bite. She jumped up in panic, terrified that it would split again. She looked at the place where the lean-to had been. Raw earth and uprooted shrubs were all that remained. Bursting into tears, she ran back to the stream and crumpled into a sobbing heap near the muddy water.

But the damp banks of the stream offered no refuge from the restless planet. Another aftershock, this time more severe, shuddered the ground. She gasped with surprise at the splash of cold water on her naked body. Panic returned; she sprang to her feet. She had to get away from this terrifying place of shaking, devouring earth, but where could she go?

There was no place for seeds to sprout on the rocky beach and it was clear of brush, but the upstream banks were choked with shrubs just sending forth new leaves. Some deep instinct told her to stay near water, but the tangled brambles looked impenetrable. Through wet eyes that blurred her vision, she looked the other way at the forest of tall conifers.

Thin beams of sunlight filtered through the overlapping branches of dense evergreens crowding close to the stream. The shaded forest was nearly devoid of undergrowth, but many of the trees were no longer upright. A few had fallen to the ground; more leaned at awkward angles, supported by neighbors still firmly anchored. Beyond the jumble of trees, the boreal forest was dark and no more inviting than the brush upstream. She didn't know which way to go, and glanced first one way, then the other with indecision.

A tremble beneath her feet while she was looking downstream set her in motion. Casting one last yearning look at the vacant landscape, childishly hopeful that somehow the lean-to would still be there, she ran into the woods.

Urged on by occasional grumbling as the earth settled, the child followed the flowing water, stopping only to drink in her hurry to get far away. Conifers that had succumbed to the quaking earth lay prostrate on the ground and she skirted craters left by the circular tangle of shallow roots—moist soil and rocks still clinging to their exposed undersides.

She saw less evidence of disturbance toward evening, fewer uprooted trees and dislodged boulders, and the water cleared. She stopped when she could no longer see her way and sank down on the forest floor, exhausted. Exercise had kept her warm while she was moving, but she shivered in the

chill night air, burrowed into the thick carpet of fallen needles and curled up in a tight little ball, throwing handfuls over herself for a cover.

But as tired as she was, sleep did not come easily to the frightened little girl. While busy making her way around obstacles near the stream, she was able to push her fear to the back of her mind. Now, it overwhelmed her. She lay perfectly still, eyes wide open, watching the darkness thicken and congeal around her. She was afraid to move, almost afraid to breathe.

She had never been alone at night before, and there had always been a fire to hold the black unknown at bay. Finally, she could hold back no longer. With a convulsive sob, she cried out her anguish. Her small body shook with sobs and hiccups, and with the release she eased into sleep. A small nocturnal animal nosed her in gentle curiosity, but she wasn't aware of it.

She woke up screaming!

The planet was still restless, and distant rumbling from deep within brought back her terror in a horrifying nightmare. She jerked up, wanted to run, but her eyes could see no more wide-open than they could behind closed lids. She couldn't remember where she was at first. Her heart pounded; why couldn't she see? Where were the loving arms that had always been there to comfort her when she woke in the night? Slowly the conscious realization of her plight seeped back into her mind and, shivering with fear and cold, she huddled down and burrowed into the needle-carpeted ground again. The first faint streaks of dawn found her asleep.

Daylight came slowly to the depths of the forest. When the child awoke it was well into the morning, but in the thick shade it was difficult to tell. She had wandered away from the stream as daylight faded the previous evening, and an edge of panic threatened as she looked around her at nothing but trees.

Thirst made her aware of the sound of gurgling water. She followed the sound and felt relieved when she saw the small river again. She was no less lost near the stream than she was in the forest, but it made her feel better to have something to follow, and she could quench her thirst as long as she stayed near it. She had been glad enough for the flowing water the day before, but it did little for her hunger.

She knew greens and roots could be eaten, but she didn't

know what was edible. The first leaf she tasted was bitter and stung her mouth. She spit it out and rinsed her mouth to remove the taste, but it made her hesitant to try another. She drank more water for the temporary feeling of fullness and started downstream again. The deep woods frightened her now and she stayed close to the stream where the sun was bright. When night fell, she dug a place out of the needed ground and curled up in it again.

Her second night alone was no better than her first. Cold terror lay in the pit of her stomach along with her hunger. She had never been so terrified, she had never been so hungry, she had never been so alone. Her sense of loss was so painful, she began to block out the memory of the earthquake and her life before it; and thoughts of the future brought her so close to panic, she fought to push those fears from her mind as well. She didn't want to think about what might happen to her, who would take care of her.

She lived only for the moment, getting past the next obstacle, crossing the next tributary, scrambling over the next log. Following the stream became an end in itself, not because it would take her anywhere, but because it was the only thing that gave her any direction, any purpose, any course of action. It was better than doing nothing.

After a time, the emptiness in her stomach became a numb ache that deadened her mind. She cried now and then as she plodded on, her tears painting white streaks down her grubby face. Her small naked body was caked with dirt; and hair that had once been nearly white, and as fine and soft as silk, was plastered to her head in a tangle of pine needles, twigs, and mud.

Traveling became more difficult when the evergreen forest changed to more open vegetation and the needle-covered forest floor gave way to obstructing brush, herbs, and grasses, the characteristic ground cover beneath small-leaved deciduous trees. When it rained, she huddled in the lee of a fallen log or large boulder or overhanging outcrop, or simply slogged through the mud letting the rain wash over her. At night, she piled dry brittle leaves left over from the previous season's growth into mounds and crawled into them to sleep.

The plentiful supply of drinking water kept dehydration from making its dangerous contribution to hypothermia, the lowering of body temperature that brought death from exposure, but she was getting weak. She was beyond hunger;

there was only a constant dull pain and an occasional feeling of light-headedness. She tried not to think about it, or about anything except the stream, just following the stream.

Sunlight penetrating her nest of leaves woke her. She got up from the snug pocket warmed by her body heat and went to the river for a morning drink, damp leaves still clinging to her. The blue sky and sunshine were welcome after the rain of the day before. Shortly after she started out, the bank on her side of the river gradually began to rise. By the time she decided to stop for another drink, a steep slope separated her from the water. She started down carefully but lost her footing and tumbled all the way to the bottom.

She lay in a scraped and bruised heap in the mud near the water, too tired, too weak, too miserable to move. Large tears welled up and streamed down her face, and plaintive wails rent the air. No one heard. Her cries became whimpers begging someone to come and help her. No one came. Her shoulders heaved with sobs as she cried her desperation. She didn't want to get up, she didn't want to go on, but what else could she do? Just stay there crying in the mud?

After she stopped crying, she lay near the water's edge. When she noticed a root beneath her jabbing uncomfortably in her side and the taste of dirt in her mouth, she sat up. Then, wearily, she stood up and went to the stream for a drink. She started walking again, doggedly pushing aside branches, crawling over moss-covered logs, splashing in and out of the edge of the river.

The stream, already high from earlier spring floods, had swelled to more than double from tributaries. The child heard a roar in the distance long before she saw the waterfall cascading down the high bank at the confluence of a large stream with the small river, a river about to double again. Beyond the waterfall, the swift currents of the combined watercourse bubbled over rocks as it flowed into the grassy plains of the steppes.

The thundering cataract rushed over the lip of the high bank in a broad sheet of white water. It splashed into a foaming pool worn out of the rock at the base, creating a constant spray of mist and whirlpools of countercurrents where the rivers met. At some time in the distant past, the river had carved deeper into the hard stone cliff behind the waterfall. The ledge over which the water poured jutted out

beyond the wall behind the falling stream, forming a passageway between.

The girl edged in close and looked carefully into the damp tunnel, then started behind the moving curtain of water. She clutched at the wet rock to steady herself as the continuous falling, falling, falling of the flowing stream made her dizzy. The roar was deafening, rebounding from the stone wall in back of the tumultuous flow. She looked up fearfully, anxiously aware that the stream was above the dripping rocks over her head, and crept forward slowly.

She was nearly to the other side when the passageway ended, gradually narrowing until it was a steep wall again. The undercut in the cliff did not go all the way; she had to turn around and go back. When she reached her starting place, she looked at the torrent surging over the edge and shook her head. There was no other way.

The water was cold as she waded into the river, and the currents strong. She swam out to the middle and let the flow of the water carry her around the falls, then angled back to the bank of the widened river beyond. The swimming tired her, but she was cleaner than she had been for some time, except for her matted and tangled hair. She started out again feeling refreshed, but not for long.

The day was unseasonably warm for late spring, and when the trees and brush first gave way to the open prairie, the hot sun felt good. But as the fiery ball rose higher, its burning rays took their toll of the small girl's meager reserves. By afternoon, she was staggering along a narrow strip of sand between the river and a steep cliff. The sparkling water reflected the bright sun up at her, while the almost-white sandstone bounced light and heat down, adding to the intense glare.

Across the river and ahead, small herbaceous flowers of white, yellow, and purple, blending into the half-grown grass bright green with new life, extended to the horizon. But the child had no eyes for the fleeting spring beauty of the steppes. Weakness and hunger were making her delirious. She started hallucinating.

"I said I'd be careful, mother. I only swam a little ways, but where did you go?" she muttered. "Mother, when are we going to eat? I'm so hungry, and it's hot. Why didn't you come when I called you? I called and called, but you never came. Where have you been? Mother? Mother! Don't go

away again! Stay here! Mother, wait for me! Don't leave me!"

She ran in the direction of the mirage as the vision faded, following the base of the cliff, but the cliff was pulling back from the water's edge, veering away from the river. She was leaving her source of water. Running blindly, she stubbed her toe on a rock and fell hard. It jarred her back to reality—almost. She sat rubbing her toe, trying to collect her thoughts.

The jagged sandstone wall was pockmarked with dark holes of caves and streaked with narrow cracks and crevices. Expansion and contraction from extremes of searing heat and subzero cold had crumbled the soft rock. The child looked into a small hole near the ground in the wall beside her, but the tiny cave made little impression.

Far more impressive was the herd of aurochs grazing peacefully on the lush new grass between the cliff and the river. In her blind rush to follow a mirage, she hadn't noticed the huge reddish brown wild cattle, six feet high at the withers with immense curving horns. When she did, sudden fear cleared the last cobwebs from her brain. She backed closer to the rock wall, keeping her eye on a burly bull that had stopped grazing to watch her, then she turned and started running.

She glanced back over her shoulder and caught her breath at a swift blur of movement, and stopped in her tracks. An enormous lioness, twice as large as any feline who would populate savannas far to the south in a much later age, had been stalking the herd. The girl stifled a scream as the monstrous cat vaulted for a wild cow.

In a flurry of snarling fangs and savage claws, the giant lioness wrestled the massive aurochs to the ground. With a crunch of powerful jaws, the terrified bawl of the bovine was cut short as the huge carnivore tore out its throat. Spurting blood stained the muzzle of the four-legged hunter and sprayed her tawny fur with crimson. The aurochs's legs jerked spasmodically even as the lioness ripped open its stomach and tore out a chunk of warm, red meat.

Stark terror charged through the girl. She fled in wild panic, carefully watched by another of the great cats. The child had stumbled into the territory of cave lions. Normally the large felines would have disdained so small a creature as a five-year-old human as prey, preferring a robust aurochs, oversize bison, or giant deer to satisfy the needs of a pride of

hungry cave lions. But the fleeing child was approaching much too near to the cave that housed a pair of mewling newborn cubs.

Left to guard the young while the lioness hunted, the shaggy-maned lion roared in warning. The girl jerked her head up and gasped at the gigantic cat crouched on a ledge, ready to spring. She screamed, slid to a stop, falling and scraping her leg in the loose gravel near the wall, and scrambled to turn around. Spurred on by even greater fear, she ran back the way she had come.

The cave lion leaped with languid ease, confident of his ability to catch the small interloper who dared to broach the sanctity of the cave nursery. He was in no hurry—she moved slowly compared with his fluid speed—and he was in the mood for a game of cat and mouse.

In her panic, it was only instinct that led her to the small hole near the ground in the face of the cliff. Her side aching, and gasping for breath, she squeezed through an opening barely big enough for her. It was a tiny, shallow cave, not much more than a crack. She twisted around in the cramped space until she was kneeling with her back to the wall, trying to melt into the solid rock behind her.

The cave lion roared his frustration when he reached the hole and found his chase thwarted. The child trembled at the sound and stared in hypnotized horror as the cat snaked his paw, sharp curved claws outstretched, into the small hole. Unable to get away, she watched the claw come at her and shrieked in pain as it sunk into her left thigh, raking it with four deep parallel gashes.

The girl squirmed to get out of his reach and found a small depression in the dark wall to her left. She pulled her legs in, crunched up as tight as she could, and held her breath. The claw slowly entered the small opening again, nearly blocking the scant light that penetrated the niche, but this time found nothing. The cave lion roared and roared as he paced back and forth in front of the hole.

The child remained in the small cramped cave through the day, that night, and most of the following day. The leg swelled and the festering wound was a constant pain, and the small space inside the rough-walled cave had little room to turn or stretch out. She was delirious most of the time from hunger and pain and dreamed terrifying nightmares of earthquakes, and sharp claws, and lonely aching fear. But it