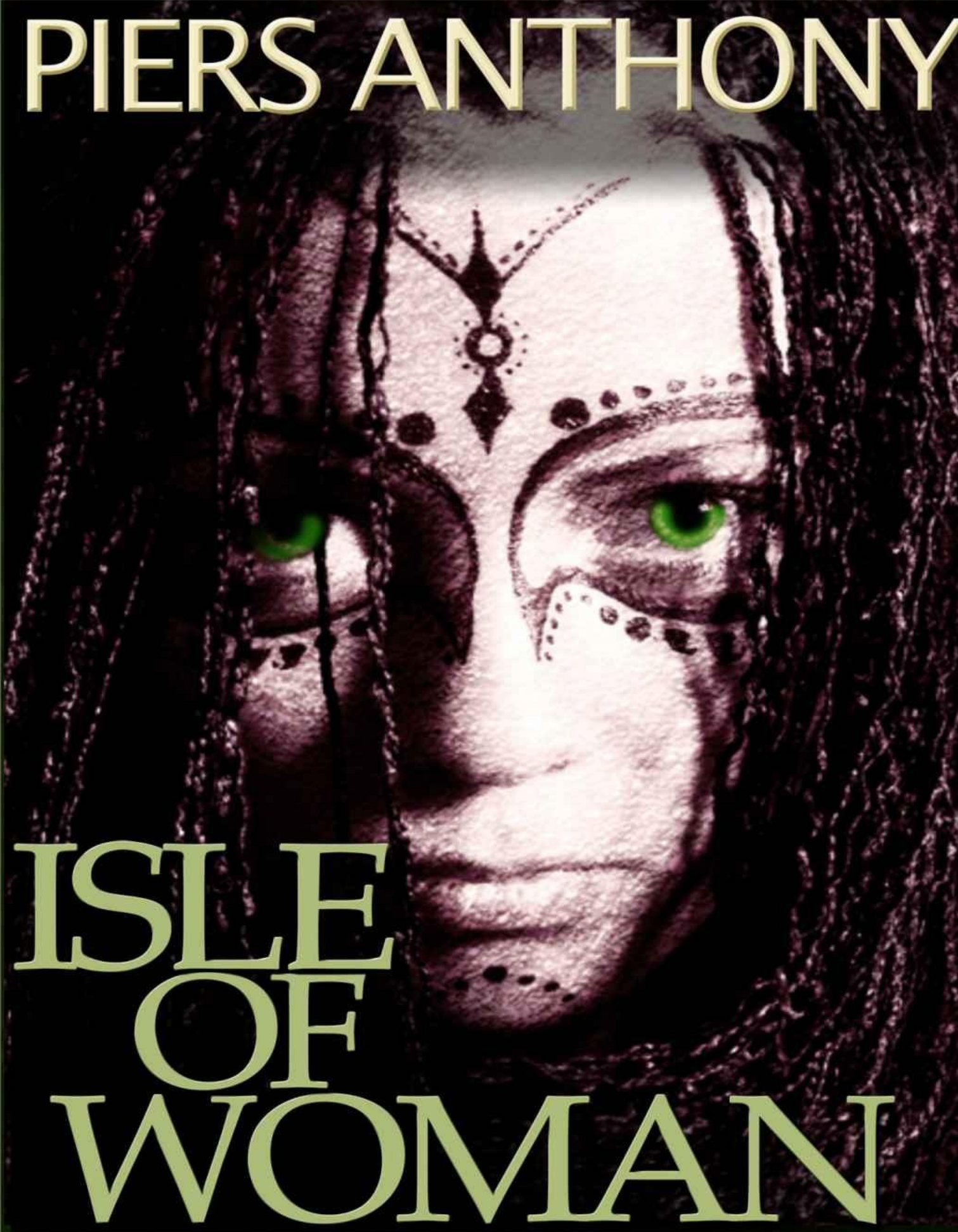


PIERS ANTHONY



ISLE
OF
WOMAN

A NOVEL OF HUMAN HISTORY

ISLE OF WOMAN

Geodyssey: Volume 1



**PIERS
ANTHONY**



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Alien Plot
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Kiai!
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This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

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THIS is a work of fiction, based on research on the derivation and nature of the human kind. For the purpose, the words “human” and “mankind” mean the species, male and female, while the word “man” will generally refer to the male alone. The validity of the theory of evolution is assumed. Those who believe in creationism may take this volume as what it is: a work of fiction based on certain assumptions.

Opinions differ about when mankind evolved from the primates—in crude terms, apes—but the case can be made that the first human being was the one who walked habitually on his hind feet. There were several primates developed differing life-styles while in the trees, with some walking on all fours above branches, while others swung below branches. The faces of the ones above faced forward while they were on all fours, while the faces of the ones below faced forward while they were vertical. This made it easy for the hanging apes to drop occasionally to the ground and walk on their two hind feet for a few steps, though they usually put down their long and powerful forearms to brace themselves on their knuckles.

As the environment changed, and the forests diminished, one species of hanging primate came to range more widely on the ground between trees, finally giving up knuckle-walking in favor of full bipedalism. This had the coincidental advantage of freeing the powerful forelimbs for carrying something other creatures did not readily do. The hind limbs grew stronger and the back straightened, making it easier to stride efficiently for increasing time and distance. One signal of the human capacity for long-range striding is the bulging buttock: a massive mound of muscle used to propel the human forward or up, and to assist in turning and balance.

Evidence from assorted disciplines suggests that mankind diverged from the pygmy chimpanzee about five million years ago. These two species have a number of things in common, such as the association in groups, bands or tribes, their high intelligence compared to most other species, and the extreme sexuality. Both differ from other creatures in having females who come into heat only partially if at all, and whose time of fertility is concealed, making them constantly available for sexual activity. But the special rigors of the ground brought many changes leading eventually to our present condition. This book will sample that history, touching on aspects throughout the timeline.

Obviously there was no single man or woman experiencing the whole of human development and history. But there were individuals, similar to others of their kind. We shall, as it were, follow one man and one woman and their families from the dawn of history through to the near future. Their appearance and situations will change as they go, but their identity will always be clear. They are much like us, and their development in life parallels that of our species.

Fair warning: though this is an extended story, a number of its assumptions are controversial, and in some cases more recent discoveries may disprove those assumptions. The object is not just entertainment; this is also a “message” novel, and the message is not pleasant. Each chapter is preceded by a map of the world, with the general location of the setting marked. There are also introductory and concluding discussions for each setting. Those who prefer to stick to entertainment may skip the maps and discussions as well as the Author’s Note. The volume will then resemble a collection of stories featuring two widely ranging families.

SITE: LAETOLI

TIME: 3.7 MILLION B.P.



CHAPTER

FOOTPRINT

The earliest clear evidence of our kind's upright stance was found in the hardened ash of a volcano in east Africa dating a bit over three and a half million years ago. Three sets of footprints extended about seventy-five feet, going north, before being eradicated by erosion. The shape of the prints and pattern of pressures are typically human. These folk walked like men. The largest may have been male, about five feet tall, weighing perhaps a hundred pounds. The next may have been female, a little over three feet tall, perhaps fifty pounds. The third was a small child.

These were made by folk called Australopithecus afarensis—never mind the pronunciation which is changing from right to wrong—one of whom the anthropologists called Lucy. They have no names and no real language, just a collection of a few useful words. They may seem more like apes than men, at this stage, but that may be deceptive.

THEY came near the fierce mountain and saw the mountain's breath spread across the plain, turning it gray. It was safe to cross, because the mountain was not roaring today, but it was nevertheless a marvel.

The man walked straight ahead, intent on his mission: to find something to eat. He was big and strong, and his fur was thick and even, showing his health. The woman followed just behind, keeping a wary eye on the child. Though she was much smaller than the man, her fur too was sleek and her body lithe. Her chest was flat, signaling her fertility, for she had weaned her son a year ago. She also gazed around, fascinated by the changed scene.

It was just at the end of the dry season. The creatures of the plain had grazed the grass down to the roots and moved on. Soon the big rains would come; already there were light showers. Meanwhile the mountain sent out its breath, which resembled the smoke of a great fire when it emerged, and the ash of that fire when it settled to the ground. She saw the tracks of animals in it: birds, rabbits, antelopes and even giraffes. A recent shower had made little holes in the powder wherever the drops struck. Some tracks had already been covered, and also some beetles. She saw a deserted bird's egg and the outline of animal dung dusted with gray.

The child took to the powder immediately. He stretched forth his little legs and stepped in the new prints made by the adults. Sometimes he went to the side, making his own little prints, then returned to the safety of his father's tracks. He chortled. The woman smiled, taking pleasure in his pleasure.

She heard something. She turned to her left and paused, listening and looking. It was only guinea fowl, spooked by their approach.

The man grunted peremptorily, and the woman resumed her motion. They passed on beyond the ash-covered region, and the ground resumed its normal colors.

They were in luck: some distance farther along they found a patch of ripe gourds. The plant had been withered by the mountain's breath, but the fruits remained firm. The man cried out, and others of their band came to gather the food. The man picked up several, and the woman took two more, and the child one. They carried these back to the band's camp.

The woman and the child began to tire, so the woman employed a familiar device: she made a grunt of sexual suggestion. The man reacted as expected: he set down his burden, allowing her and the child to do the same, and drew her into him for a bout of copulation. The other members of the tribe paused, considering; then several others paired off, liking the notion. Sex was always a satisfactory interlude.

The woman relaxed, letting the man support her. He held her upright, facing him, her feet off the ground. He sniffed her genital region, excited by the odors there. Then he let her slide down to make contact with his erect penis. Most creatures approached their females from the rear, but the upright posture enabled these ones to be frontal if they wished, and often they did wish it, liking variety. The woman was like a doll in his embrace, allowing him any liberty he chose to take. It had been several hours since their last coupling, so he was quite amenable to her suggestion. He bounced her around, squeezed her, and kissed her fur as his member drove deep into her. This might have seemed like rough play, but she was tough and he was vigorous rather than violent.

By the time he was done, both the woman and the child were rested. They picked up their burdens and resumed their trek. The other couples were also breaking up, satisfied. Sex had no significance beyond the pleasure of the moment and the continuing association it signaled.

They came to the tree where the woman's sister labored, watched by other women of the band. They reached her as the great brightness of the sun settled behind a distant hill, setting the clouds

ablaze. The sister was of similar size, with smooth light fur, but differed in two respects. Her breasts were prominent, their nipples poking out through the fur of her chest. And she was sexually nonreceptive, because she had already been fertilized. This was why the other woman was kept busy now: it was, in part, her job to protect the security of the family by making sure their man had no reason to respond to any outside woman. Had the family lived apart from others of their kind there would have been little problem, but in a band with several receptive females fidelity could be strained. Two women were enough, in this case, because their cycles of availability were complementary: when one was pregnant, birthing and nursing, the other was receptive. By the time her sister got a baby started, the original woman was ready again. In that manner the two kept the man to themselves, and benefited from his superior ability to forage and to protect them from both outsiders and other men in the tribe. They shared food, when necessary, with others, but not sex or child caring.

They were part of a band that traveled as a unit, but when children grew up the males went out to join other bands and mate with their women. A man was entitled to as many women as he could succeed in taking and keeping from other men. The women in turn preferred to have as much of a man to themselves as they could, and sisters or close friends cooperated in that design. It was almost impossible for a single woman to hold a single man, because of her infertile periods while nursing her small children, but two or three cooperating women could manage it.

Half the babies were lost in their first year, and some fell prey to accidents or illness thereafter, so it was necessary to sire several to be sure one would survive. On average, a woman was sexually receptive about half the time. She was less fertile than other female creatures, so that it could take her a year to conceive. That was what made it possible for only two women to keep one male, if they were correctly phased. If both conceived at the same time, they would lose him, because neither would be able to entice him with sex. Neither the man nor the woman thought of it exactly this way, but this was the mode that enabled the fledgling species to survive.

Indeed, the sister's labor was complete: she held a furry baby boy. There was a red mark on his little forehead, but it did not matter, for he was healthy. Now the man had two sons, by two sisters and two women. It was good.

In this manner the tracks leading toward the full human species proceeded. Yes, they are our ancestors. Normally when the male is considerably larger than the female, he has more than one mate, so their social conventions were probably not the same as ours. Three million years could change things, however. Because he was born as the blazing sun set, and had a birthmark sharing this color, we shall call the new baby Blaze.

SITE: KOOBI FORA

TIME: 1.9 MILLION B.P.



CHAPTER

TOOL

Two million years before the present, Australopithecus had given way to Homo habilis (Homo HAB-i-lis), “handy man,” larger and with a bigger brain. He lived in the Great Rift Valley of east Africa. He was, as far as we know, the first of our kind to use tools regularly and effectively. But of the four kinds of tools this sequence shows, only one is what we normally think of as such. And—he wasn’t the only descendant of Australopithecus extant.

EMBER was four years old. She was bold for a girl, and liked to use her hands. She was always grabbing onto interesting sticks and colored stones and trying to form them into fun patterns. But most of all she was intrigued with fire. Her mother had to watch her constantly when they were near a recent burn, to stop her from trying to take hold of an ember and scorch her fur. Thus her name. She had in time learned caution, but not enough; she still wanted to pick up bright embers, trying to wrap them in leaves to protect her fingers. She also had a small liability: there was a slight tremor or tic on her left cheek that appeared in times of stress or concentration. It was hardly evident ordinarily, but

her mother was aware of it when the child nursed, and at other times. She hoped that Ember would grow out of it before others noticed. Fortunately the child was so active, moving her head frequently to focus on things, that she seldom stayed still long enough for it to be obvious.

Yesterday there had been a burn on the land. It had crossed the prairie and the near valley, destroying their shelter and driving them into the water of the lake for safety. It had burned itself out during the night, but it had not been a comfortable time. Now the women of the band were out foraging for roasted mice while the men were out searching for a new place to make a safe retreat. This was, in a sense, a reversal of the normal order, for now the women were hunting meat while the men sought a homesite. It happened when it made sense.

Ember and her mother walked along the lake shore. It was safe here, because if a dangerous animal came they could wade into the water and the creature would not chase them. The fire had burned right up to the water and stopped. Now the land was covered in black ash, and pockets were still crackling. Ember was eager to go to them, to satisfy her fascination, but her mother stopped her with a terse reminder each time she started to stray. "No!" Ember had learned that word early, as well as her name.

They reached a section the fire had missed. Here the grass remained green and the trees retained their foliage, though some at the edge had been wilted by the heat. Right at the edge, hemmed in by a channel leading from the lake, was a large crackle-section. Oh, wonderful!

But they waded into the lake to avoid this, disappointing Ember. She hung back, staring at the puffs of smoke drifting up, wishing she could go and grab at them. What wonderful stuff fire must be if she could only get close to it!

However, she did spy a pretty little stone with bright veins making patterns through it. She quickly picked it up and put it in her mouth for safekeeping. It tasted stony.

Then they spied something alarming. A big cat was crouching in the brush. But it wasn't after them. It had brought down a giraffe and was chewing on it.

They quickly retreated, keeping quiet. Ember knew that silence was essential in the presence of danger. She was frightened. She felt her cheek quivering. She almost swallowed her stone, so she poked it into her cheek for safekeeping.

They returned to the shore beyond, casting wary glances behind, then ran back to the place where others were gathering. This was beside a cache of stones they had gathered and deposited here before the fire. They had similar caches scattered strategically around the lake, so that there was always a source of tools or weapons near where they might be needed.

"Cat! Cat!" Ember's mother cried, pointing. Then: "Giraffe." She made a gesture as of something lying on the ground.

That was clear enough. Several men picked up stones, carrying them in their crooked arms, and moved toward the place. Ember's mother went along to show them the way, so Ember went to staying close.

They entered the water by the crackling place and made themselves as quiet as possible. They came to the cat. It was a single one, not a pride. It looked up at them, blood on its monstrous fangs. It growled warningly.

But they were several, and it was one. They had the protection of the water, which the cat would not enter by choice. They could attack it with impunity, and they were hungry.

The first man flung a stone. His aim was good, and the missile struck the cat on the flank. The cat jumped up, snarling. It made as if to charge them, but stopped at the water's edge.

Reassured by this, the others flung their stones. Ember wondered whether she should throw her pretty pebble. She hoped not, because she wanted to keep it. Two stones missed, but two more struck

The cat screeched and turned, snapping at the stones, but getting nowhere. Then, as the men advanced toward the shore, throwing their last rocks, the cat realized it was overmatched and retreated reluctantly. One more stone caught it near the tail, and it bounded away.

Ember knew that was a good thing, because the men had been bluffing: they had used up all their stones. But the cat didn't know that. So it had given up when it was at the point of victory because no man would have stepped onshore while that fearful predator was there. They would not even have approached it, had they not been very hungry and had the protection of the water.

Then men took hold of the carcass and dragged it to the water. There it floated, making it easy to move. They hauled it along until they reached the crackling place. Then they dragged it out and rolled it right into the heart of the crackle.

There was a horrendous sizzle and big cloud of vapor that delighted Ember. The fire was trying to eat the giraffe! But it couldn't; it could only burn it, making a special smell. The smell of burned mouse, only bigger.

There was a cry from the lookout. "Ape!"

Everyone looked. There were many apes coming, attracted by the commotion. They would not have come while the cat was there, but it was gone. They wanted to know what was happening here and whether there was anything good to eat.

The men moved into the lake. Some went to fetch some of the stones they had thrown. But though the apes were dull, they knew about stones. They charged over in a mass and swept up the remaining stones and hurled them at the men. Each ape was much larger than each man, and had much stronger arms. The men retreated back into the lake and ducked down as the stones came.

Ember took a breath and held it and went down under the water. She heard splashing near her, but didn't know whether it was from a man or a stone. The stones could not hurt anyone under the water, but it was hard to stay down long. Ember had to come up to breathe.

She saw that the apes had used up the stones and lost interest. They were wary of the crackling place, not understanding fire, and they didn't like the smell of the roasting flesh. So they moved on, disappointed. They were strong, but stupid.

The men came out. The giraffe was still cooking, and the smell was very strong now.

They brought out the special stones, the ones with the sharp edges, and as the fire died down they used these to slice across the hide so they could pull it off, and to slice across the meat so they could get pieces. They passed these around, and Ember and her mother got to bite into the meat. It was tough, and not as good as fresh fruit, but after the fire they hadn't found much fruit.

Then Ember and her mother walked to the new place the men had found, beyond where the fire had been. It was a big tangle of thorns and nettles and stingy plants, but there was a hole in it for them to get through. No bad animals would come for them here! Ember settled down with her mother huddling close for warmth as the night cooled, and others lay close on either side. Tomorrow they would make a better shelter, and hope it didn't burn soon. But the fire had helped feed them today.

Ember was satisfied. She took the stone out of her mouth, which she had preserved despite eating the hot meat, and tried to focus on its prettiness. But it was too dark now for her to see, so she put it back in her mouth for tomorrow.

This day's activities show the manner Homo habilis used his tools and his wits to survive in a sometimes hostile environment. He entered the water to avoid the prairie fire, and used the water also as protection from large predators, such as Megantereon, a saber-toothed cat the size of a lion. He used available fire to cook the body of Sivatherium, a short-necked giraffe the

stood seven feet tall and had antlers. He used thrown stones as weapons, and chipped stones and knives for carving flesh or fruit, and maintained caches of such stones in scattered places so that supplies were usually handy. He used thorny brambles to make safe shelters. Thus water, fire, stone and brambles all were tools. He was smart enough to take advantage of the situations which he found himself, so he got by though he was by no means the dominant creature of the region.

The "ape" was a cousin, a parallel hominid, the vegetarian *Australopithecus boisei*: as big as a modern man, and strong, but relatively stupid. He prospered for perhaps a million and a half years, far longer than *Homo habilis*, but was in the end a nonsurvivor. It may be that when the climate changed he was no longer able to forage effectively, while the "handy man," on the fringe, was able to scrounge his way along and survive.

SITE: GREAT RIFT VALLEY

TIME: 400,000 B.P.



CHAPTER

FIR

Homo habilis gave way to Homo erectus (HO-mo e-REK-tus), “upright man,” about one and a half million years ago. He approached modern human size and had a larger brain than his predecessor, and was well equipped to survive. Indeed, he was to conquer the world. About one million years ago the Sahara desert of northern Africa greened somewhat for a time, allowing Homo erectus to pass north and spread across Europe and Asia as well as remaining in Africa. But it seems that his evolution continued most progressively in Africa.

There is some evidence that this man used fire, but it is inconclusive. Did he use fire intentionally, or did he avoid it, or did he take advantage of it when he had a chance? Perhaps a few people found ways, in special circumstances.

BLAZE was eight years old and ready for something better. The fiery birthmark on his forehead set him apart from the other children of the band, making him the object of a certain distrust and sometimes ridicule. His older half-brother Ashfoot had protected him somewhat, but now Ashfoot was

thirteen and a man. He had gone out alone with a spear and run down a small deer and killed it. It had taken him two days, pursuing the animal day and night, following its tracks by moonlight and guessing when he had to, but he had done it. So Ashfoot was a man, and had joined the camp of the single men, and was no longer near enough to help Blaze. Ashfoot could go out to seek a woman of another band when he felt ready. He had proven himself. But how could Blaze do the same? His main interest was fire—and fire was supremely indifferent to him.

Today fire was near, however. It was burning in a nearby valley, after a storm. That was funny, how fire came from water, when water always stopped fire. But Blaze thought he knew how it happened. Sometimes there were fire flashes in storms, as if the water was casting out the fire in its mist, and these fire flashes in the air might start the fire on the ground. Then it would burn until it encountered water, or ran out of dry grass to eat. Whenever there was a fire, Blaze went to investigate on the pretense of looking for fleeing game animals. His sharp eyes found such animals often enough to make this claim legitimate. But actually it was the fire itself that fascinated him. He never dared get too close to it, for it was hot and fierce and unpredictable, but he explored it as well as he could without getting burned. He had become a private expert on its ways.

He took his small spear, which was a dry stick he had sharpened against a stone and baked in the sun, making it hard. He had used it for small game, but lacked confidence in it for anything larger than a rabbit. It was mainly for defense, to point at a predator and keep it at bay. Maybe it couldn't kill a big cat, but it could damage an eye or gullet, and that might be enough. He hoped. He also kept an eye out for climbable trees, and tried never to be far from one. Trees had always been the friends to his kind, because few bad predators climbed them.

He crested a hill and paused, looking down into the shallow valley beyond. There was a shelter there, not big enough to house a band, but obviously of human design. It must be a foreign hunter because none of Blaze's band lived separately. He would have to go back and tell the others of this intrusion, because this was home territory.

But before he could move, a woman came out of the shelter and saw him. She signaled. She wanted him to go to the shelter.

Blaze was in doubt. She was adult and he was a child, so he should obey. But she was a woman and he a boy, so he didn't have to. He had to answer only to his mother. Also, this woman was foreign, so might be an enemy.

Then another figure came out. It was a boy somewhat smaller than Blaze. No—it was a girl, because there was no bulge of substance between her legs, no penis. The fur was smooth throughout.

The woman did not signal again, but waited for him to obey. Blaze stood, trying to decide what to do. But the girl did not hesitate. She walked toward him, spreading her hands in the signal of friendly meeting. It was remarkable for a girl to approach a stranger; usually they were very cautious.

As she approached, he saw that she was nicely formed, with even limbs, light fur, and a pretty face. She seemed to be about his own age, though smaller. She smiled, showing even teeth. Her prettiness was marred only by a little twitch on her left cheek, as if she were trying to shake a fly loose in the manner an animal did. She stopped when she was close and tapped her chest. "Ember," she said, using the word for the remnant of a fire.

Suddenly he knew he liked her. "Blaze," he said, tapping his own chest, using the word for bright fire.

She smiled again, recognizing their affinity. She reached out with her open hand, the fingers curving up in invitation.

Blaze reached out and took the hand with his own, accepting it. They stood that way for a moment, gazing into each other's eyes. He saw now that hers were green, a shade he had seen on

once before: when he looked into still water and saw his ghost image. He touched his cheek with his free hand, pointing to his own eye, then to hers. "Green."

She nodded, agreeing, and smiled a third time. This time he smiled with her, accepting the expression as he had her hand. They had met only this moment, yet he had already found more favor with her than with any girl of his band. Maybe she had been teased about that cheek, just as he had been about his forehead.

She turned and walked toward the woman, gently tugging him along. He went with her, oddly enjoying her presumption.

She led him to the woman, who had waited stolidly throughout. "Blaze," Ember said, indicating to him. Then, indicating the woman to him, "Mother." As if that hadn't been obvious.

But then Ember tugged him on to the entrance of the shelter. He saw that it was not well made, being more like something a woman would throw up for overnight. They looked in. There was a man lying there. He was still, and there was the smell of blood. He had been injured, and now was perhaps dying. Flies were buzzing.

Now Blaze understood their situation. Ember's father could no longer protect them, and they needed help.

He would return to the band's camp and tell them. Men would come and decide what to do. They would help the man if they could, and if he died, someone might take Ember's mother. That depended on how well she could work and gather, and whether her body was appealing.

Blaze faced back the way he had come. "Camp," he said, pointing.

"Camp," Ember agreed. Then she kissed him on the ear.

Blaze was over the ridge and out of sight of the family before he realized just how much he had liked that kiss. Ember had shown that she liked him, though she had seen the mark on his forehead. No girl had done that before. Of course the boys and girls of the band didn't kiss each other much anyway, since none of them would grow up to mate with each other. The boys would all go out to find the girls of other bands, and would become members of those bands, while other men would come to the home band to find girls. Blaze wasn't sure why this was so, but did not question it.

In a sense he had gone out and found a girl of another band. But it didn't mean anything, because he was not yet a man. Still, at this moment, if he were to choose a girl, Ember would be the one.

Soon he reached the camp. "Man!" he cried, pointing back. "Down." He made the gesture of lying on the ground. "Woman. Girl."

This was important news. Three men followed him back to the neighboring valley. Blaze was afraid that the foreign family would be gone, and he would be blamed for giving a false alarm. But the shelter remained, with the woman sitting outside it, and the girl beside her.

Blaze went a little ahead, so they could see him, and know that these were friends he was bringing. "Blaze!" he called, to make it certain.

The men checked. One went in to touch the wounded one. He emerged, shaking his head negatively. "Gone," he said.

The woman nodded. She had known it. So had Ember, who looked unhappy.

The men considered the woman. One gestured to her to stand. She did so. He walked around her, studying her contours. He tugged on the longer fur of her head, and pinched her buttock. She was healthy. She should be an asset to the band, especially since she had a healthy child with her. He nodded affirmatively, looking at the others. They nodded, agreeing. The woman would do.

The man pointed toward the camp. He gestured, indicating that the woman should go that way. She started walking.

Ember came to Blaze. She walked beside him. He knew she was glad that his band was accepting her and her mother. Now they would not die unprotected.

As it happened, the woman was fertile, making her interesting to the men of the band. She was not young, but she was new, and therefore novel, and her odor was attractive. She was not committed to any member of the band, so they all wanted to mate with her. But she had to be chosen by one, and agree to stay with him, and his existing mate had to agree too. That was the way of it. As it happened, most of the women did not wish to share with a stranger; that was why they stayed together in the band with women they knew, and accepted the suits of foreign men singly or in compatible pairs. However, one man's mate had died; he had been about to depart to look for another, but now he took this one. She accepted him, and he lay her on a mat and sank his hard penis into her immediately. By that token she was his; all who witnessed the act knew it.

In a moment it was done. The woman got up, and now the other women acknowledged her. She would not be harassed by them or by other men. Her receptivity remained, stirring the desire of the other men, but they had no recourse; she served the desire of only the one. Soon that desire reappeared, for he had not had a woman for some time, and he copulated with her again. No one thought much of it, but Blaze found the act fascinating, and wished he knew how to do it. But his penis hardened only by its own will, not his; and in any event he had no girl with whom to experiment. He envied the boys who had the ability to try it, even if they had access only to girls who were beneath the age of maturity and so lacked interest.

Meanwhile the fire still burned in the neighboring valley, and animals from that region were passing through this region. Unfortunately they were grown and healthy, impossible to bring down in the open. Only when foolish ones got caught in the dead-end gully could they be trapped and attacked and killed. Several men had staked out that valley, lying hidden, waiting for an unwary animal to make that mistake, but the local animals knew better.

Blaze had an idea. If the fire could come here, it might drive the animals into that gully. There could be much fresh meat. The fire normally chose its own course, heedless of the convenience of men. But could there be a way to change its course? He wanted to find out.

He set out, as he had before. Then he heard something. Ember was following him. He could walk her away, for she was after all a girl, but he didn't. He let her catch up with him and they went on together. He gave no other signal, because it would only lead to teasing by the other children, but the fact that he allowed her to accompany him was significant. It meant that they were friends, and the others took note, just as they had when the man had copulated with the new woman. It was important to know who associated with whom, for in the event of trouble friends stood up for friends. Boys normally stood up for boys, and girls for girls, but it was not absolute.

Ember, it turned out, had good legs, and was able to keep up with his rapid stride. Women learned to move well, because foraging was not always conveniently close. If there was hunting to be done, the men set camp near that, and the women simply had to range farther for the berries, fruits, nuts and tubers they specialized in. Ember was free now because her mother was busy taking up the continuing attention of her new man, and had to stay close to the camp where her man was, or else go out with him. Once his jealous early desire passed, she would join the foraging women. At present the other women were sharing their foraging with her, and she would share hers with them when they needed it. A child was not expected to forage with strangers; she had to be with her mother, until she became a woman and was taken by a man. Probably Ember was not eager to remain in the camp while her mother was active in a way Ember could not share, as she did not know the other children. So she stayed with Blaze.

And Blaze was very glad to have her with him. He felt a kind of propriety, because he was the one who had found her and her mother, but it was more than that. She liked him, and was willing to show it. Their eyes matched. Their names matched. Did she like fire as he did?

They skirted the valley where Ember's father lay. The creatures of the field and forest would chew up the body and scatter the bones, and the smell would be bad for awhile. It was best just to let it happen. Next year when the band passed this way again, there would be little if any trace. Few would even remember, or care if they did. But he saw Ember looking sad, and understood why: she had lost her father, who perhaps had treated her kindly.

They came to the fire. It had passed this region and gone elsewhere, but a number of fallen branches still crackled and there were clumps of smoking vegetation.

"Oooo," Ember breathed, her eyes shining. Now it was clear that she was just as interested in fire as he was. Joyed by this discovery, he hugged her and kissed her ear, returning her expression of the prior day. She laughed and hugged him back. That felt very good.

Then they explored the remnants of the fire. Ember found a branch that was burning on one end and clear on the other. She touched it, tentatively, then put both hands on it and picked it up. She held the smoking torch, chortling with her accomplishment: she was holding fire!

That was exactly what Blaze had been considering. If such a branch were taken away from the fire, would it keep its own bit of fire with it? He didn't know, but he thought it might. So he looked for another burning branch, and found it, and picked it up. Then he spoke. "Camp."

Ember looked disappointed. She set down her branch, ready to return. Then she saw that Blaze was not setting his branch down; he was carrying it with him. "Oooo!" she repeated, thrilled, and picked hers up again.

They carried the two burning branches back to the camp. Not much was happening there; most of the folk were out foraging or hunting. Then they went on beyond, where some animals grazed. There were several buffalo, a flock of large birds, and an elephant. Ideal prey!

Beyond the animals was the gully, invisible from here and deceptive in its shallow origin, but a trap at its deep far end. The wind was blowing toward it. Blaze knew that the fire liked to follow the wind. If this worked—!

"Fire," Blaze said. He put his stick down on the driest mat of grass he could find. Smoke went up, but nothing else happened. The stick had died down, and the fire in it was weak. It didn't like to be away from its burning field.

Ember set her stick beside his. Then she got down on her hands and feet and put her face close to the fire. She blew. What was she doing?

Ember blew again, and again. She gestured Blaze to do the same. But he hung back, perplexed.

More smoke went up, and there was a crackle from one of the sticks. The fire was coming back to life! He realized that she was making a wind for the fire, and the fire liked it, so it was responding. He had never thought of that.

Now Blaze got down beside Ember and added his breath to hers. The ends of the two sticks glowed hotter, and the smoke increased. Ember took some straw and put it on top of the sticks, and blew again.

The fire expanded, creeping in a bright line across the sticks. He could see its minute progress and realized that Ember did too. She had the same sharp vision he did, that it seemed that most other people lacked. He adjusted his blowing, to get the maximum effect on that glimmering bit of flame.

Suddenly there was live fire, blazing up. They had done it! They had made the fire return from its hiding place within the wood. Now it was spreading into the dry grass. The wind fanned it, and it laid back its ears and dug deeper, getting brighter. The two sticks, too, were blazing up again, restored to

the fire around them. They liked this, for they were back in a burning field.

~~The animals winded the smoke and began to get nervous. Blaze saw that they would move away to the side, avoiding both the fire and the gully. "Here!" he cried, picking up his stick and running head them off. Ember followed with her own stick.~~

They got ahead, because the animals remained uncertain and were milling around rather than moving purposefully. Animals weren't as smart as people. They put down their sticks and blew on them again. This time it was easier, and the flame came more readily. In a moment they had another fire starting.

The animals veered away from it and finally headed into the gully, the seemingly safe place. Then the watching men jumped up, calling to others: "Hunt! Hunt!" The hunt was on.

Blaze looked at Ember and smiled. She smiled back. They had done it! They had brought the fire and used it to make the animals go into the trap. The band would eat well for a long time, after the hunt was done.

It might have been this way. But such use of fire would have been a sometime thing, with Homo erectus, dependent on fortunate circumstances. Mostly they had to hunt the old-fashioned ways. Bright individuals like Blaze and Ember might have had inspiration, but the more conservative adults were slow to catch on, and slower to change their ways. It has ever been thus.

At this stage there was no concern about the welfare of the animals. They were there to be hunted. They looked out for themselves.



CHAPTER

ISLAND

Homo erectus spread out and became acclimated to various regions of the world. In Africa he evolved into modern mankind between 200,000 and 100,000 years ago. Exactly when and how this occurred is unknown, and conjectures differ. One conjecture is the aquatic hypothesis, one form of which is presented here. The theory is controversial, and anthropologists may be bitterly divided on the subject, but it does explain some things that otherwise seem almost inexplicable.

At the northeast end of the Great Rift Valley in Africa is a triangle of lowlands cut off by the mountains of what is now Ethiopia, the Afar Triangle. Within this is the Danakil depression. In the past this was once Danakil Island; at this time it may have been merely a shore region cut off from the rest of Africa by mountains and barren lands. We shall call it the Isle of Woman.

The full-blown aquatic hypothesis has mankind settling the region between four and eight million years ago, when there is a gap in the fossil record. Thus man developed in a place that has not been carefully explored for such fossils. Changes in climate over the millennia require man to adapt to new conditions, and increasingly he had to go to the water for food and protection that was inadequate elsewhere on the island. At those times when the island rejoined the land, or became a lowlands coastal area, groups of men went back out into Africa and down the fertile highway of the Great Rift Valley, accounting for the abrupt appearances of the

advancing forms of man. Australopithecus afarensis, found in that Afar region perhaps by coincidence; then Handy Man, Upright Man, and Thinking Man, all found along that valley.

Intriguing as this is, it is not the case in this narration. There is a question whether there really is that much of a fossil gap, because the line of man may have diverged from that of the pygmy chimpanzee only five million years ago. Many aspects of the nature of mankind can be explained by other means. Instead we have here a more limited variant, wherein the human being evolved as a strider on the plains of Africa until perhaps 200,000 years ago. At that time one shore-dwelling contingent was trapped in the Afar region, and it was this isolated group that suffered the shifts of habitat and life-style that led to anatomically modern man. The women had been foraging increasingly in the water, and wading into it to avoid danger on the land, and now this trend intensified.

The time mankind spent in the water led to some dramatic and some subtle changes. Much of the rest of the body hair was lost, and subcutaneous fat substituted for warmth, making this the fleshy “naked ape.” Because increased mass and fat helped survival in cool water, women became larger than they had been, and more solid in the lower portions. Their legs and hips may have been what by today’s standards would seem ludicrously corpulent. Babies became chubby. Mankind still had hot chases on land, so he developed sweating as a cooling mechanism. This meant that he never strayed too far from freshwater sources, such as springs or rivers, either.

With increasing brain size, the human head expanded in proportion to the body. Babies were born with larger heads, making birthing more difficult, and they took longer to become self-sufficient. This increased the importance of the mother, and of the family unit. More adaptations were necessary. These continued at the region that may have defined the present physical nature of man: the Isle of Woman. Perhaps it was, more than figuratively, the birthplace of mankind.

EMBER was out in the morning with several other girls and a woman, foraging for oysters in a distant bay. When they filled the woven basket on the beach, they would carry it back, and the tribe would have roasted oysters that evening. They took turns diving down in the shallow water and feeling carefully for the hidden creatures. One girl always watched while the others dived, because the waters were not necessarily safe. If a shark came, she would give the alarm and they would scramble out to the beach.

Ember had just found a good oyster, using her sharp vision, and she brought it up—to hear a cry of alarm of another nature. “Man! Man!”

Of course that meant strangers, because the men of the tribe needed no cry of alarm, and in any event would have been called by name. Two of them. This could be good news or bad news, depending on the origin and intent of the men. Some tribes stole women from other tribes, and it was hard to do anything about it without risking ugly fighting.

Ember stood beside Clamshell, a girl of thirteen whose breasts had bulged voluminously in the past year, signaling her readiness for mating. Ember’s own breasts were more modest, but of course she was only twelve and they might grow some more. She peered up at the men on the beach, feeling the facial tic starting just when she least wanted it.

Both were shaggy in animal cloaks, their beards giving them a ferocious appearance, but it was evident that they were young. They carried wood spears and stone knives. They might be hunting, but if so, they had to leave, because this was the local tribe’s territory.

“Who?” the matron Crabshell demanded challengingly. She was Clamshell’s mother, and she

accepted trouble from no women and not many men. She was of course standing chest-deep in the water, as were the girls. If the men tried to enter the water, all of the women would swim quickly away, screaming for help. Men could generally swim faster than women, because they had long arms and more muscles on them, but they would not be able to catch up before the men of the tribe heard the screams and came to the rescue.

The taller man tapped his chest. "Tusk," he said.

The shorter one followed suit. "Scorch." Ember saw that he had what looked like a bad burn on one arm, for which he might have been named. It was ugly, but he seemed to be able to use the arm well enough.

"Why?" Crabshell demanded next.

For answer, each man lifted his cloak, showing his penis. That was answer enough: they had come looking for women. That made them considerably more interesting to the girls. Normally a man showed his penis only to other men, or to the woman with whom he meant to copulate. In this context it meant that either of these men was willing to do so with any of the women here, which meant in turn that both men were single and hoped the girls were too.

Crabshell nodded, unsurprised. "Wait," she said to the men. Then she turned to face the three girls. "Clamshell. Ember." She pointed toward the village.

The two girls swam to shallow water, not directly toward the men, then stood and waded on out. The men remained where they were, but watched closely. Clamshell, aware of this, stepped out on the beach and shook herself clear of some of the water, causing her flesh to ripple from chest to buttocks, giving the men a good view. Ember found herself embarrassed, and made no such display. Perhaps if she had had Clamshell's flesh, she would have done so. As it was, she was conscious of the slenderness of her hips and legs, a disadvantage when the water was cold. Often she had to go to the village fire for warmth, or get under a cloak, instead of standing comfortably in the water. Fortunately her fascination with fire compensated, and if anybody objected, Blaze stood up for her. Since Blaze had become the keeper of the fire in the last two years, no one else could object.

They ran toward the village. Now Ember had the advantage, for her slender body could run more lightly and swiftly than Clamshell's full one. Even when she was carrying her oyster. Clamshell also had to hold her breasts in her hands to stop them from bouncing and banging uncomfortably, and that handicapped her running. Soon she was breathing hard and falling behind, while Ember was just getting pleasantly warm. She slowed to accommodate her friend, having made her point in the usual way. Of course when it came to impressing men, Clamshell had a future, while Ember didn't, yet.

They reached the village. This consisted of several shelter domes fashioned of stones, sticks and bones, with animal skins stretched over the tops. In the center was the hearth, where Blaze kept the village fire burning. Other boys fetched in wood for it, but Blaze saw to it that the wood was properly used. He never let the fire go out, not even when it rained, for it would be a difficult chore to fetch more fire. They would have to get it from a neighboring village, which would mean giving up something of value, or find free fire burning out somewhere. That was almost impossible after a rain. So Blaze had a structure he used to cover the central part of the fire, keeping the rain off, and he knew just how to tend it so that it survived. Sometimes Ember helped him, for she loved the fire too. She loved Blaze; he treated her well despite her inadequacy of body. She smiled at him as they approached, and handed him her oyster. Had they been mated, this would have been his due; as it was it was another signal of their closeness. She didn't care about the mark on his forehead, and he didn't care when her cheek twitched; they shared a keen vision for details, and knew what counted and what didn't.

"Man! Man!" Clamshell cried, relaying the news. "Penis!" She made a finger at her crotch.

pointing down, in the standard signal for maleness. Because she had done it as well as saying the word, others knew that she had seen the penis herself.

Oho! That got everyone's attention. There were men showing penises, looking for women to mate with. The men of the tribe were interested, because any men who found mates here would join the tribe and strengthen it. The single women were interested, because some of them might find men now. The women with babies were interested, because soon there might be more like them. The children were interested, because this was a rare occasion. Even the nursing babies, gripping the long hanks of their mothers' hair as they floated in the water, seemed interested for a moment.

Four men gathered. Ember led them back, for she knew where it was, and there was no point in having Clamshell try to do it. Ember could run almost as swiftly as a man.

She brought them to the place where the two foreign men waited. The men talked. Then the two visitors were escorted to the village, where things were already being set up for the occasion. First ritual food was served: bits of roasted ox meat. Only a token, not a meal—but hunger wasn't the point. When the visitors ate with the men of the village, they were bound to do the village no harm, and the villagers would not attack them. It was peace between them, for this occasion. If their business together did not work out, the visitors would depart peaceably.

After the food, the visitors stated their business: "Woman." As if that had ever been in doubt.

The elder men of the tribe nodded. This meant much more than merely acquiring mates. The two visitors would have to join the tribe. They would have to prove themselves worthy, for the tribe wanted no liabilities. Each of the village men had come similarly to the tribe, joining its women and assuming its identity. Once they made this commitment, they would hunt and fight for this tribe, not the one from which they had come.

But they would join only if they found mates here. The head tribesman stood and faced the nearby water, where all six eligible girls stood chest-deep, their breasts making the water curve around them. The headwoman signaled, and the girls waded out to stand at the edge of the sand. Ember was at the end of the row, being the least endowed. Indeed, at this moment she was glad of it, because she didn't want to mate with a man yet. She preferred to remain a girl longer, and keep her friendship with Blaze. In fact, she wished she could mate with Blaze, and not just because he had green eyes like her, but they both knew that that was impossible. Not only would he have to find a woman of another tribe, but at age twelve he was too young. Ember had matured faster, as girls generally did, so she was now a young woman while Blaze remained a stripling boy. It would be several more years before he was ready.

She saw the eyes of the two men studying the girls. The eyes lingered longest on Clamshell, unsurprisingly. They hardly touched Ember.

"Turn," the chief said. Then they turned, showing their backsides. Ember knew that she was similarly deficient from this vantage. Her feelings were mixed. She felt bad because her body was not full-fleshed, yet hopeful that she would not be chosen. Of course a girl could turn down a man's suit, but that was not a good thing to do, for men did not come by that often. A girl who waited too long might never be chosen, because younger girls would become more attractive, and that could be a disaster.

Tusk spoke. "Yes." He was satisfied that one of these women was for him.

"Yes," Scorch echoed, and the girls turned back to face the men. He too had found his woman. But the matter was not yet done. Who were the ones? Ember wondered apprehensively. Surely neither man would have chosen her. But now she remembered that both had seen her run, so knew her health and capacity in this respect. If they were choosing by endurance instead of appearance—but of course she could decline, if she had to. Probably she wouldn't have to.

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