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Boneland

Written by Alan Garner

Published by Fourth Estate

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ALAN GARNER

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FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Fourth Estate
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.4thestate.co.uk

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 00 746324 4

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Typeset in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



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For the worth of two Marks and a Bob

The dream was wonder, but the terror was great. We must
keep the dream, whatever the terror.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet VII, line 75

The stones have no rosetta.

Mark Edmonds, *Prehistory in the Peak*, p.96

Hit hade a hole on þe ende and on ayþer syde,
And ouergrowen with gresse in glodes aywhere,
And al watz holȝ inwith, nobot an olde caue,
Or a creuisse of an olde cragge . . .

It had a hole on the end and on either side,
And overgrown with grass in clumps everywhere,
And all was hollow within, nothing but an old cave,
Or a crevice of an old crag . . .

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, lines 2180–4

'Listen. I'll tell you. I've got to tell you.'

'A scratch, Colin.'

'I must tell you.'

'Just a scratch.'

'I will.'

'There.'

'I shall.'

'Done.'

He cut the veil of the rock; the hooves clattered the bellowing waters below him in the dark. The lamp brought the moon from the blade, and the blade the bull from the rock. The ice rang.

He took life in his mouth, spat red over hand on the cave wall. The bull roared. Around, above him, the trample of the beasts answered; the stags, the hinds, the horses, the bulls, and the trace of old dreams. The ice rang. He held the lamp and climbed among antlers necks ears eyes horns haunches, the limbs, the nostrils, the rutting, the dancers; from the cave to the crack. He pushed the lamp at the dark and followed his shoulder, his head twisted, through the hill along the seam of grit, by the nooks of the dead. He slipped out; pinched the lamp, and crawled between slabs into the gash of Ludcruck on snow.

The colours and webs faded and he saw the world. The ice had dropped from the two cliffs flat in the gap. He braced himself against each side of stone, and moved over the fall.

He found them lying together. He tried to touch her and the child through the ice. He saw his echo, but they had no echo. Though the eyes met, they did not speak. They were not him. Where the crag had shed, spirit faces looked down from the scar, rough, knuckled, green; and grass hung over the ledges.

He passed where the cleft opened more than a spear length. The sky was blue, icicles shone; the sun played, but could not reach the floor. He went along, up, around, and left Ludcruck hole by the arch to the hill.

He met the footsteps, woman and child, and walked against them, back above the river, cobbles banging in the melt of summer flood, until a fold of land shut off the sound and he came to the lodge. He opened the hide and went in.

He lay for one day. He lay for two days. He lay for three days.

‘Colin. Colin?’

A face was leaning over him, concentrated, checking. He heard and saw, but did not wake.

Next, he was in the ward, and a panel in the ceiling rattled.

‘A cup of tea, diddums?’

‘No. Thanks.’

‘Coffee, my love?’

‘No. Thanks.’

‘Water, pet?’

‘Please. Yes.’

‘Chin up, chicken.’

A hand lifted his head, and another put the hard glass between his teeth.

‘Thanks.’

Someone wiped his beard. The colours and webs faded. He saw the world.