

**THE FIRST
WIZARD ON EARTH**



a novel of fantasy and reality



The work of looking carefully is the work of everyone who tends.

— attributed to a woman of the long plain

PART ONE

The Bone



CHAPTER ONE



The Lecture That Was Not Given

Dr. Iris Halloran was forty minutes into the lecture she had not, in fact, intended to give.

She had intended to give the lecture on the wall-paintings of Lascaux, which she had given seventeen times in nine years and which she could deliver, on a bad morning, while thinking about her mother. The slides had been queued up since Tuesday. The seminar room was full — thirty-two undergraduates, four postgrads, and a visiting professor from Lund who had wanted very particularly to hear her talk about the running stags. She had walked to the lectern. She had said good morning. She had looked down at her notes.

And she had begun, instead, to talk about a thing she had never spoken of in any seminar room in her life.

She had begun to talk about the burial.

It was, she heard her own voice saying, the oldest known burial in Europe. It had been excavated in 1984 in a limestone chamber in the Cantabrian foothills. The body was that of a man of approximately forty years of age. He had been laid on his back, with his arms crossed over

his chest, and around him had been placed twenty-three objects, of which only seven had been identifiable as tools and the remaining sixteen had been classified, in the original report, as “ritual.” The dating had at first been disputed. The dating had at last been accepted. The body in the chamber was thirty-eight thousand years old, give or take a thousand. He had been there since approximately the time the last Neanderthal woman in Iberia had died.

She paused at the lectern.

“Now,” said her voice, still without her permission, “none of this is in dispute. What I have not, until this morning, told anyone is what was in his hand.”

The seminar room went still.

She heard herself describe it. A small piece of carved bone, the size of a child’s thumb. Carved into a spiral. The spiral was not symmetrical. It went anti-clockwise for the first three turns and then changed direction, very abruptly, and went clockwise for the last two. Iris had measured it. The change of direction occurred at exactly the point at which, by the position of the inner turns, the spiral represented a particular star — a star which, at that latitude and at that depth of time, would have been visible directly above the chamber for three nights a year, in midwinter, for approximately six minutes after sunset.

“I checked the astronomy,” she heard her voice say. “I checked it twice. I sent the measurements to a colleague at Greenwich. He confirmed them last March.”

The visiting professor from Lund raised his hand.

“Dr. Halloran — ”

“Yes, Professor Lindqvist.”

“Why,” he said carefully, “have you not published this?”

Iris looked at him for a long moment. She had no answer prepared. She had not, until twelve seconds ago, known she was going to say any of this aloud.

“Because,” she heard her voice say, “the man in the chamber was not Cro-Magnon and he was not Neanderthal. The skull is the wrong shape for either. The teeth are the wrong shape for either. The femur has been examined by three separate laboratories and none of them will commit to a species. He is not on the human family tree. He is something the family tree does not have a branch for. And I have been sitting on the report for two and a half years because I do not know what to do with him.”



The seminar room emptied very slowly.

Two of the postgrads stayed behind to ask questions Iris could not answer. The undergraduates filed out in the small embarrassed silence of young people who had walked into a room expecting a lecture on cave-painting and had received something they did not yet know how to talk about. Professor Lindqvist gathered his papers without speaking. At the door he turned and looked at her, and he said, very quietly: “Iris. Send me what you have. I shall not show it to anyone. Send it to me by tonight.”

“Henrik — ”

“Tonight, Iris.”

He went.

She sat down on the edge of the lectern. The room felt larger than it had ten minutes ago. She had broken, in some small unspectacular way, a

thing she had been carrying for two and a half years. The breaking had not, in the end, been deliberate. She was not sure what it had been.

Her phone, on the lectern beside her, buzzed twice.

She did not, at first, look at it. She knew, in the small clear part of her mind that knew such things, that it would be her sister, or her department head, or a wrong number. She had set it to silent for the lecture. It buzzed for messages only when there were several at once.

She picked it up.

There were six messages. They were not from her sister or her department head or a wrong number. They were from six different people — three colleagues, two journalists she had never spoken to, and one number she did not recognise — and they had all been sent in the last four minutes, and they all asked, in different words and with different degrees of restraint, exactly the same question.

Was the man in the Cantabrian chamber awake?

Iris stared at her phone.

She had told no one but Professor Lindqvist about the burial in the last six months, and only Lindqvist in the last six minutes. Her seminar had not yet had time to discuss it outside the room. The undergraduates had only just begun, by now, to be in the corridor.

And yet six people in different cities had, in the same four minutes, sent her a question that presumed knowledge of a body she had not described to anyone.

She stood up. She left the seminar room. She walked down the corridor and out into the small grey courtyard of the Faculty of Archaeology, and she stood under the yew tree at the corner of the courtyard, and she read the six messages a second time.

The last of the six, from the number she did not recognise, was the shortest. It read: “Dr. Halloran. Please come to King’s Cross. Platform 9. There is a ticket waiting for you at the office of the station-master. I shall meet the train at the other end. — A.”

There was no other identification.

Iris read the message a third time. She stood under the yew tree for a long minute. Then she walked, slowly, back into the building, and she went up to her office, and she opened her safe, and she took out a small padded envelope she had not opened in two and a half years.

Inside the envelope was the small piece of carved bone.

It was, when she lifted it into the light of her desk lamp, exactly as it had been on the day she had taken it from the chamber and put it in the envelope and locked it in her safe and gone home to her flat and not slept for three nights. The bone was a pale ivory colour. The spiral was carved into one face. The change of direction occurred where she had measured it.

She had not, in two and a half years, looked at it twice.

She looked at it now.

The bone was, very faintly, warm in her hand.

It had not been warm before.



CHAPTER TWO



The Boy Who Saw the Fire Move

He was perhaps eleven years old, although he did not, in those years, know what years were. He knew the seasons. He knew that the long cold had come and gone four times since his mother had stopped speaking to anyone. He knew that the river at the foot of the cliff had been frozen three of those times and unfrozen once. He knew that he had grown taller, because the ledge above the sleeping place which had once been at his eye now came to his collarbone.

He did not, in those years, have a name. The people of the cliff did not use names among themselves; they used the small clicks and gestures with which they had always identified one another, and the names had not yet been invented. Names would be invented, by a woman of the cliff, in his sixteenth year. By then he would already have been called several other things, none of which he had asked for.

On the morning the story begins, he was sitting by the fire at the mouth of the cliff. The fire was the small careful fire the people kept burning day and night, in the shallow stone hollow at the entrance of the dwelling, against the cold of the upper valley. It was tended by two old women who took turns, and it was the most important thing in the

world to the people of the cliff, and a child who let it go out was beaten until he could not stand.

The boy was not tending the fire. He was looking at it.

He had been looking at fires, in the way he looked at them, since he had been very small. He had not, until this morning, known that other people did not. He had assumed everyone saw what he saw. He had assumed everyone watched, as he watched, the small slow patterns the heat made in the air above the flames, the way the patterns repeated, the way the patterns sometimes — when no one was watching the fire but him — paused in their repeating and made a different pattern for a few seconds, and then went back.

He had assumed everyone could, when they wanted to, make the patterns pause.

He had been doing this since he had been four. He had not done it often. He had done it, mostly, when he was bored, and the times he had been bored had been mostly when the women were grinding seeds on the long stone and there was no one to play with. He had made the patterns pause. He had made them, sometimes, change shape. He had once, when he was seven, made the small blue flame at the heart of the fire lift, for the count of three breaths, into the air above the fire and hang there. His mother had seen it. She had hit him hard on the side of the head, and she had said, in the small careful clicks the people used among themselves: Do not. Never. Do not.

He had not done it again with anyone watching. He had done it, sometimes, when he was alone.

□ □ □

On the morning the story begins, he was alone at the fire.

The two old women who tended it had gone down to the river to fetch water. The men were further down the valley, where a young deer had been wounded by a hunter the day before and had been tracked to a thicket. The other children were inside, in the back of the dwelling, being kept quiet by his mother, who had not, as he had said, spoken to anyone in four years but who could still keep five children quiet by the small movements of her hands.

He was looking at the fire.

He had a question he had been carrying for several days, and he did not know who to ask. The question was: what would happen if he made the fire come away from the wood entirely?

He had been thinking about this since the previous spring. He had watched the fire many hundreds of times. He had seen it eat wood, and he had seen it eat dry grass, and he had seen it, once, eat a small dead bird the youngest of the old women had thrown into it for reasons she had not explained. The fire ate. The fire needed to eat. He had always known that. But the patterns above the fire — the slow heat-patterns he could see and which, he had begun to realise, the others could not — those did not eat. Those simply existed, in the air above the fire, for as long as the fire below them existed.

He had been wondering whether the patterns could exist without the fire below them.

He sat at the fire that morning and he looked, very carefully, at the patterns. He chose one. It was a small pattern of three turning shapes that he had watched for some time. He held it in his eye. He held the eye of his mind on it. He did, in the small inner space behind his forehead, a thing he could not have described to anyone — a thing he had been doing, in increasing degrees of intentness, since he was four.

The pattern lifted out of the heat above the fire.

It lifted, very slowly, perhaps a hand's breadth into the air above the place where the patterns usually were. It hung there. It was, in the cool air above the heat, faintly visible, in the way the patterns had always been faintly visible to him: a small turning shape of light that was not quite light, of warmth that was not quite warmth.

It hung there.

He held it in the eye of his mind. The fire below it crackled normally. The pattern, above, did not crackle. It did not, in any way, behave as part of a fire. It was, in some new sense the boy was only just beginning to understand, simply itself.

He held it for what would later, in his memory, become approximately ten of his careful breaths.

Then he let it go.

The pattern sank, very slowly, back into the heat above the fire, and it joined the other patterns there, and it resumed its old slow turning.

The boy who would, in time, be the first wizard on earth — although neither word existed in his world, and would not exist for thirty thousand years — sat very still at the mouth of the cliff and breathed in and out, and he understood, for the first time in his eleven years, that what he could see and what he could do was not, in fact, what everyone else could see and do.

He had been a long time understanding this.

He would, for the rest of his life, remember the morning he had first understood it. He would remember, in particular, that the morning had smelled of pine smoke and cold stone, and that the river at the foot of the cliff had been making the small steady sound it made when the ice on it had just begun to crack.



CHAPTER THREE



King's Cross

Iris caught the four-fifteen.

She had told no one in her department where she was going. She had told her sister, by text, that she would be away for a day or two on a research errand and not to worry. She had not packed; she had not been home. She was carrying her work satchel, her laptop, the padded envelope with the small piece of carved bone, and the long grey coat she had been wearing when she had left her flat that morning. She had not, between the seminar and the platform, eaten.

The ticket had been waiting at the station-master's office, as the message had said. It was a first-class single to Edinburgh Waverley, in her name, paid in cash. The station-master had handed it to her without comment. He had not asked for identification. He had looked at her face, once, as if checking it against something he had been told to expect, and he had given her the ticket and a small white envelope.

She had opened the envelope on the platform. Inside was a single sheet of paper, in the same hand as the messages. It read: "Dr. Halloran. The train will be met at Waverley by a man in a brown coat. He will take you to a house. The house is not on any map. You will be safe there. Bring the bone. — A."

Iris had stood on the platform for some minutes with the sheet of paper in her hand. She had thought about not getting on the train. She had thought about going home, and putting the bone back in the safe, and pretending the morning had not happened. She had thought, in particular, about the six text messages, which had now grown to nine, and which had begun, in the last hour, to include voicemails she had not opened. The voicemails were from numbers she did not recognise. The phone, which was in her satchel, had started to vibrate at irregular intervals like a small frightened animal.

She had got on the train.



She had a window seat in a first-class carriage that was, at four-fifteen on a Tuesday in October, nearly empty. There was a man in a grey suit two rows ahead, reading a book on supply chains. There was a woman in a green dress at the other end of the carriage, with two small children who were asleep. There was no one else.

Iris took out the padded envelope. She set it on the table in front of her. She did not, for some minutes, open it.

When she opened it, the bone was, again, warmer than it should have been.

She lifted it into the carriage light. The spiral was as she remembered it. The anticlockwise turns, the abrupt reversal, the clockwise outer arc. The astronomy that pointed to a star three nights a year in the latitude of the cliff in which the body had been buried.

The body of a man who was not Cro-Magnon and not Neanderthal.

The man who, at this distance of years, she had begun to suspect was something the family tree had no branch for.

She turned the bone over in her hand.

On the back of the bone — on the back, which she had examined a hundred times in the laboratory and had photographed in raking light and had measured under a low-angle microscope — there was now a mark she had not seen before.

It was a small cross.

Not a Christian cross. A simple intersection of two short lines, at right angles, scratched into the bone with what looked like the end of a fingernail. It was very small. It was very fresh. It had not, on the morning of the seminar, been there.

Iris held the bone steady in her hand and she felt, very faintly, that the bone was warm not in one place but in two: a thin warmth along the line of the spiral on the front, and a smaller point of warmth on the back, exactly at the crossing of the two short lines.

She set the bone on the table.

She sat back in her seat. She closed her eyes.

She had not, in two and a half years, allowed herself to think about the possibility that the man in the Cantabrian chamber had not been entirely dead.

She had filed the dating report. She had filed the species report. She had filed the inventory of grave goods. She had not, anywhere in those three reports, said the thing she had said this morning in front of the seminar, which was that none of it made sense unless one assumed a category of being that was not yet acknowledged in any archaeological literature. She had not used the word in the seminar either, although she had thought it, and she had been thinking it, in private, for two and a half years.

The word was wizard.