



CHAPTER ONE — THE FIRST QUESTION

"Time does not begin where the clock ticks, but where the silence chooses to listen." — *from*
The Last Question Asked Before Silence, author unknown

The cave was not a cave.

It had the shape of one: jagged basalt mouth, breathless cold, and echoes that fell too slow. But Izack had lived long enough to know the signs. The shadows did not retreat when he held up his light. They clung to the walls like they were *remembering* him.

He stepped inside anyway.

The elven scholar's robes dragged against stone slick with ancestral condensation. Every surface shimmered faintly, not with water, but with dormant runes—fossils of thought that hadn't spoken aloud in centuries.

The moment he crossed the inner threshold, his staff pulsed in his palm. Not with alarm. With *interest*.

"Someone's watching," he muttered. "Or waiting."

There were no traps. No monsters. Just the silence of a question no one had dared to finish asking.

He knelt in the center of the chamber. Beneath him, a spiral etched into the ground—a glyph both primal and precise. A convergence of leylines, perhaps. Or an echo of something older.

"Let me guess," he whispered to the cave, "you're a place that remembers."

Something shifted in the air.

Behind him, feathers rustled.

"Your tone is very 'elven,'" came a voice like a page being turned in a forgotten library. "Mildly arrogant. Purposefully alone. But sincere."

Izack turned slowly.

Perched on a jagged outcrop of crystal was a raven. No, not a raven—something *shaped* like one, with feathers that shimmered between ink and inscription, as though made of runes bound in the language of breath.

"Polly," she said, before he asked. "Because you'll try to name me something poetic. I prefer short. Sharp. Annoying, if spoken too often."

Izack blinked. "Familiars don't usually name *themselves*."

"I'm not a familiar," she replied. "I'm an archivist. I chose you because you ask better questions than answers. But if you're boring, I'll leave."

"Fair," said Izack, smiling faintly.

It took him a century of solitude to understand the glyph.

Not linear time—*his* time. Avalon didn't measure in hours. The place he would build would bend time like breath bends fog: lightly, invisibly, with consequence only in retrospect.

He carved a spiral from the rock using only resonance, each line sung rather than struck. Polly watched, offering commentary, insults, and the occasional reminder to eat.

When the Spiral was complete, he held up the Chronological Nexus Staff and whispered the question.

"What will remain of me, when only echoes are left?"

The ground answered.

It did not shake. It did not roar. Instead, it *breathed*—and with that breath, a tower rose.

First the base, then the layers, coiling upward like a shell of light and purpose, threading into the pocket of space-time Izack had fashioned. It spun gently, like it was alive.

The Spiral Spire.

He collapsed to his knees, not from exhaustion—but awe.

Polly landed beside him. "That's... excessive."

"I didn't build it," he said, eyes wide. "I just gave it the question."

The tower sang a single note. Pure. Resonant. Eternal.

Polly tilted her head. "It heard you."

"Not me," said Izack. "*Us*."

And Avalon was born.

From outside, the Spire appeared a peaceful mystery. Inside, it shifted.

When Izack returned weeks—or centuries—later, the walls had formed their own libraries. Floating scrolls written in languages not yet invented. Plants that bloomed according to memory, not season.

And in the Crown of Thought at its peak, he found a figure: tall, woven of starlight and rune-thread. Its face shimmered with every voice Izack had ever used.

"I am the Archivist," it said. "I am the first vow remembered. I am the last question still waiting."

Izack sat in silence beside it. They said nothing for a long time.

Eventually, Polly joined them. "So what now?"

Izack exhaled. "We build a home. A school. A refuge. Something that listens as well as it teaches."

"And if no one comes?" Polly asked.

"Then we'll keep asking," Izack said, feeling his words leave his mouth and bounce around the space around him, reflecting the heart of his statement back at him, the last notes of his voice echoing back off the shimmering glass that acted as walls, "... keep asking."

A shimmer pulsed in the center of the Spire, as if the very air had caught his intention and spun it backward through time. In the glass, the echo returned not just in sound—but in image. For a breathless second, the reflection warped. Not Izack's face. Not Polly's. A stranger's.

A woman.

Eyes like the Ravencrest dawn. A presence wrapped in clarity and storm. She smiled—but not at him. Not yet.

Izack stood still, his hand slightly trembling. The image flickered and was gone.

Polly tilted her head. "What did it show you?"

"I don't know," Izack whispered. "But I think she's waiting."

And with that, he turned toward the living stair of light that curled outward from the Spire—his next question not formed in words, but in motion.

Avalon had heard his heart before he understood it himself."

The Spiral hummed. Time folded politely out of its way. And beyond the sky of Avalon, the first dream began to echo.