



CHAPTER TITLE: THE DAY THE WORLD DIDN'T MOVE

At the edge of Avalon's foundational cycle, when the Spiral Spire was only half-awoken and the leyline anchors still whispered uncertainly in their sockets, something impossible happened.

Time stopped.

Not figuratively. Literally. Everything halted.

Not with panic. Not with noise. With *stillness*.

A dropped quill hovered mid-air in the library. The waterfall outside froze mid-crest. Golems paused mid-step. The pulse of spell-glass paused in the Spiral Spire's veins. The World Tree stilled, not from wind or silence—but from listening.

And in that moment, Zara moved.

Only Zara.

She walked alone, barefoot, through the breathless air of the campus. Her hand brushed leaves that didn't rustle. Her voice didn't echo. Every spellbook and chalkboard sat in waiting, frozen on questions she had already solved in her mind.

"Is this a test?" she thought. **"Or a gift?"**

When she reached the central terrace of the Spiral Spire, she found Izack sitting on a floating stone bench that refused to orbit.

He looked up.

"Oh good," he said. "It worked."

"You did this?"

"I tried. Honestly wasn't sure if it'd catch."

He stood and stretched, joints popping. Around them, Avalon held its breath.

"I figured," he said, "if we're going to build a school that defies reality, we should take a day off when reality gives us one."

Zara blinked. "Everyone else is frozen."

"Yup."

"I've read this is dangerous."

Izack handed her a cup of tea that had brewed in a temporal stasis bubble. "Yup."

They sat together in that suspended silence for hours that didn't pass.

She asked questions. He answered a few.

They shared stories. One about a shrub that bit Polly. One about a student who accidentally folded their dorm room into a teacup.

And then, when she thought it was all for nothing, he stood and pulled something from his robe.

It shimmered—robes. Not ornate. Simple. Blue and silver. Stitched with personal runes.

"Your graduation robes."

She froze.

"I don't feel ready."

"That's how you know you are."

He knelt—a little awkwardly—and offered her a second gift: a delicate silver amulet, etched in her own hand-writing, from a spell she didn't remember casting. Inside, a portal spun—a pocket realm just for her.

"For practice," he said. "And failing gloriously. And creating spells no one's ever seen."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say thank you. Then go be better than me."

Later, as time resumed, no one noticed anything had happened. Not really.

Except Zara.

She walked back to her room, cradling the amulet, robes folded neatly under one arm. She passed a student sneezing mid-cough, a bird catching up to its own wingbeat.

And she smiled.

In her journal that night, she wrote only one thing:

"I didn't steal the time. I accepted it."