

Chapter 1: Between Light and Breath

Light before ground. Sound before sky. A place alive with thought and feeling, where memory shaped itself into form. Spirals of gold and crystal pulsed through the air. Patterns hummed. Souls drifted like fireflies, weaving, stretching, unraveling.

One glowed brighter than the rest.

Ha Tu.

He did not walk. He pulsed through the crystal lattice of Atlantis, where rivers of light flowed beneath soaring arches of living crystal. Around him, others drew close, their voices falling as threads of pure color, each note shimmering through the air.

"Wait, Ha Tu. The Earth is not ready."

"You are not ready."

"To enter is to forget. Remember this."

The warning settled over him, but the fire within him refused to dim. Beyond the lattice, he had seen the bridge burning between worlds, a passage from spirit into flesh. No soul had crossed in the way he imagined. He believed memory could survive the journey. He believed humanity was ready.

Something stirred along the edge of his awareness, faint at first, then impossible to ignore. Another heartbeat answered his own. Another life waited somewhere beyond the veil.

The crystals bent toward him as though listening. Breath became music. Light gathered into form while he shaped a vessel unlike any before it, a cradle that might carry memory itself into the waiting world.

Then came the choice.

A mother.

A waiting womb.

A child yet unborn beneath the tangled green canopy of Earth's first forests.

The descent came without warning. Light became weight, and weight became flesh. Heat, blood, breath, sound, pain... every sensation rushed upon him at once. Memory broke apart, slipping through his grasp like water through open hands. The tiny body would not move. It would not breathe.

Darkness folded over him. Not empty. Waiting. He reached for the crystal lattice that had always answered him, but nothing held.

Don't let me forget...

The thought broke apart before it was complete.

Then the Circle gathered around him. They had no faces, no bodies, only a presence he had always known. Sorrow surrounded him, but so did love. One voice spoke with quiet grief.

"You tried to carry the fullness of the Source into a world that could receive only a spark."

Another answered.

"No soul enters unchanged."

Silence lingered between them until the oldest voice spoke once more.

"Go now. Become what you came to learn."

The Circle faded into the light. Yet something remained.

A spark. A thread. A promise.

Pain returned with another pull. The darkness fractured.

Smoke curled through reed walls. Night insects sang beyond the little hut while stars hung low above the trees. Ha Tu, once at home among crystal and light, now belonged to breath, hunger, and earth. This time he would not resist. This time he would surrender.

The hut faded, but the smell of smoke remained.

Erin's eyes fluttered open.

For a moment she lay perfectly still beneath the rough wool blanket. Wind whispered through the thatched roof while rain dripped steadily from the eaves. The fire had burned low during the night, leaving only a few pieces of peat glowing beneath their blanket of gray ash. Somewhere beyond the cottage, a rooster welcomed the coming dawn.

She turned her head toward the hearth. A thin ribbon of smoke curled upward. She frowned.

That wasn't the smell.

She knew the smell of their fire. She had known it all her life. Peat smoke clung to everything in the cottage: the blankets, Mam's apron, even her own hair after tending the hearth.

This was different.

She pulled the blanket closer around her shoulders and looked around the little room. The worn table stood where it always had. Mam's kettle still hung over the dying fire. Her small stool rested beside the hearth, waiting for another day's work. Nothing had changed.

Nothing... except the feeling she could not shake.

She listened.

Only the wind brushed the thatch. Only the fire settled softly into ash. No strange voices lingered in the room.

Outside, a cart rattled along the muddy lane, and a sheep answered another somewhere across the fields. Morning had come whether she was ready for it or not. Soon Mam would be stirring the fire, putting the kettle on, and finding work enough to fill the day.

Erin settled back beneath the blanket, though she knew sleep would not come easily. She didn't understand what had frightened her so deeply, only that whatever she'd seen had followed her into waking.

She closed her eyes for just a moment, then opened them again.

No.

She didn't want to dream again.

She hugged the blanket close and listened to the wind outside. She would stay awake.

She didn't remember closing her eyes.