



CHAPTER ONE

Echoes of a Forgotten Self

Everything seemed odd as I opened my eyes. My surroundings were murky and disoriented. I could not remember how I had ended up there, but one thing was clear: I wasn't in a place I recognised. My body felt heavy, like my own skin had become a prison, and the air smelled stale—suffocating. There had been no light, only shadows, dancing around the room like they had lives of their own.

Then the voice cut through the silence, low and guttural, like the growl of something ancient and worn. “I'm old,” it rasped, “and so very tired.”

I turned my head, but my neck protested—stiff and sluggish, as if I hadn't moved it in years. Slowly, painfully, I managed to catch a glimpse of my surroundings. The room

was a claustrophobic shell of dark wood and slanted windows, all facing me as if watching my every move.

The voice continued, now revealed to be that of a weak woman, with eyes keen but heavy, her face etched with age. “I was young once, free, untethered. All that remains are memories of what once was.”

Her words settled heavily on me. It felt as though she wasn’t just speaking about herself, she spoke about her past.

Her tone softened as she continued, “You’ll feel it soon—the power, the strength. You will become stronger as a result. You will understand tomorrow.”

She handed me a strong, dark, shimmering drink. Despite my instincts telling me to say no, my hand moved without my consent. The environment changed and the liquid burned as it descended and slid down my throat. My vision deteriorated, the room became blurry, and I dozed off before I could resist.

When I awoke, the first thing I heard was the sound of an axe biting into wood—a sharp, rhythmic chop echoing through the silence. It was a sound I knew, but it felt out of place there, in that strange, timeless house.

I bolted upright, heart pounding in my chest. The bed creaked beneath me, protesting my movement as I scrambled to my feet. Something was wrong. I had been asleep, but it felt as though an eternity had passed. A decade? A century? The passage of time became... irrelevant.

I glanced around in panic. The house was still dark. The air hummed with an eerie energy. I heard things—things no one should ever have heard. The faint rustle of leaves far away, whispered secrets in a language only I could understand.

A chill ran down my spine as I realised what had happened. The drink. The woman's cryptic words. I looked around for the old woman, but she was nowhere. Gone as if she had never been there at all.

My body felt different, like a shell that no longer fit. I flexed my fingers, feeling the strange, alien power coursing through me. I wasn't entirely myself anymore. Something stirred inside me. Something ancient. Something else.

Who had I become? And why?

I didn't know, but I felt the change. The power swept through me like fire, like wind, like something too vast to contain. Had I only known that whatever was happening, whatever had been done to me, I couldn't turn back.

I wasn't human anymore.

Not completely.

And I was going to find out why.