

# Prologue

A poignant orchestral piece plays. The full moon lends its pale glow to the dance floor, where Christopher looks into the opposite mirror and sees hundreds of reflections of Helena moving in unison, caught between the facing mirrors that span its entire width. With her eyes closed, she slowly spins into a pirouette, spreading her arms as she balances on one leg. He then looks at his own reflection and watches the beast within emerge, its presence marked by dark veins crawling across his face.

Christopher, his breath heavy and hoarse, turns away from something so pure and innocent, only to witness the darkness and malevolence rising further out of him. It is a new experience for him to watch his body grow through his own glowing eyes, to observe it shifting into different forms, to witness the fangs emerging from his maw, stretching from ear to ear. The angular, high-raised cheekbones, his jet-black hair with pointed ears protruding through it, and his increasing height all add to his devilish appearance. It grants him the extra presence and power he so eagerly welcomes. The remnants of his clothing tear away from his enlarged body, and through his nose, with flared nostrils pulled high, Christopher is overwhelmed by the ghastly stench lingering between death and life.

The composition inside Helena's mind, by her favorite composer, is disrupted by the three syllables of her name, spoken in a deep and ominous voice.

*"He-le-na."*

A loud repetition of her name paralyzes her, tearing her abruptly from her trance. She stares at Christopher's suddenly mutated body and understands that this beast was the one who called her name. It doesn't look at her directly but stares ahead into the mirror, where it can see them both. Without locking eyes, the mutated figure addresses her.

*"Remember your promise."*

The entrance door explodes with a deafening blast! Before the splinters hit the floor, Helena finds herself staring at something lifting a severely wounded man by the collar of his jacket. Draped in an old, open fur coat, worn-out shoes, and a pair of jeans, this creature's ashen-gray skin peeks through. Its gaunt face, accentuated by jutting cheekbones and pointed ears, meets Christopher's gaze with bold, unwavering eye contact. Unlike the moonlight that reflects off the membranes behind Christopher's retinas through his mutated pupils, the light finds no

solid surface in the large, dark pupils of the figure before him. Instead, it illuminates the strange mist swirling within those void-like, irisless eyes.

With its mouth open, it slowly turns its head and fixes its empty eyes on the terrified Helena. Her breath catches as chills run down her spine, now that this creature, with its hollow gaze, stares straight into her soul. Again, her eyes fail to track the creature's lightning-fast movements, and in an instant it penetrates its long fangs deep into the man's neck. Blood spills and is sucked in with great gulps. Christopher flawlessly picks up the victim's heartbeat, noticing the intervals grow longer. The rhythm is interrupted by a new, powerful double beat. The blood this creature claims fills its own empty veins, and Christopher is captivated by the fact that it brings its dead heart back to life. The color of the man's skin also transfers to the bloodsucker, and in return, the victim takes on its ashen pallor.

"Make sure you drain him to the last drop."

The words come from the doorway where the door is blown out, as a pair of well-dressed kin of the creature step inside.

"We take only from him, send him straight to the next dimension, and do not grant him the gift of lingering in between."

He is slender and vain to the very roots of his long, slicked-back, snow-white hair, dressed in an elegant three-piece suit.

Beside the speaker walks an equally well-dressed figure, bald-headed and with a larger, broader build. "The greatest strength in what stands across from him isn't physical. It knows exactly how to command what flows through its veins and bend it to its will."

Helena fears for her own life, and begins to seriously question whether the so-called visions in her dreams had ever shown her the path she was destined to walk. The killer before her bares his jaws, revealing long, bloodstained fangs as he exhales in a hoarse rasp, his mouth slick with gore. Helena looks into the empty, misty eyes staring at her as if she were nothing more than food.

"Yes, take a good look. They say the eyes are a reflection of the soul. Stare through the mist filling his pupils, and you'll see—we had to surrender ours in return," the slender leader declares, his tone measured and cold. With a speed too fast for the eye to track, he moves toward Helena.

Christopher slashes at the passing creature, but he's too slow. His claws tear through empty air, and in an instant, he sees Helena caught in the grasp of the smooth-talking leader on the far side of the hall. The creature pulls Helena's back against its chest, one arm coiled around

her waist. With its other hand, it lifts her chin, meeting Christopher's gaze with a taunting, sadistic smile.

The sight disrupts Christopher's inner focus. Coupled with the full moon's glow washing over him, it allows the virus within him to tighten its grip more and more. He drives his claws into the wooden dance floor in frustration, locking himself into the mental battle. A snout emerges on his face, his frame expanding, and fur sprouting from his darkened skin. Christopher snaps his jaws shut before baring them wide, unleashing a demonic roar from the depths of his diaphragm.

The bald creature grows uncertain at what it sees emerging from Christopher. "We don't want to push him this far. We need to continue this fight during a new moon."

Christopher forces the beast further into the depths, and the thick hairs sprouting from his darkened skin retract. His snout recedes as well, shifting back to the familiar proportions of the second phase.

"If he succumbs to what just tried to get out, he knows that what he seeks to protect will be safer in my arms than in his own. You don't need my help just yet. His fight isn't with us. It's within himself. How far will he go to protect her? Would he rather have her pierced by his own fangs? Or ours?"

A body thrown into the mirror sends shockwaves rippling across its surface. Lacking the flexibility to absorb them, the glass shatters from the center outward, exploding into thousands of pieces and sending shards flying across the hall.

Amid the deafening clatter of shattering glass, the leader shields Helena from the sharp debris, turning his back on the chaos. Facing the mirror on the opposite wall, he stands firm as Helena begins to regain control over her senses. She looks into the mirror at the thing restraining her. It can't be her eyes that are failing her, as her own reflection is crystal clear. But the head and hands, uncovered by her captor's three-piece suit, appear restless in the mirror. The existence of these beings between two dimensions does not allow for a clear reflection. It is blurry, and the outline of his skin fails to form a solid boundary with the surroundings. His form may waver, but his voice is eerily clear as it passes through the fangs hovering beside her neck. "We live on borrowed time. Time that can be infinite."

Blood coating his mouth leaves a streak on Helena's neck as he drags his teeth upward along her skin. He applies pressure, just enough for her to feel it—but not enough to pierce. Then, with a sharp snap, his jaws snap shut right beside her ear.

Christopher roars in pain as another deep slash rakes across his back. When his roar stops there is a split-second of absolute silence. In that silence, even time holds its breath.

To the leader's horror, his subordinate hangs impaled on Christopher's claw, his body arched back, arms hanging limp at his sides and his head lolled backward. Long talons pierce through his back, jutting out from his stomach.