

The night was cold, but Thomas's heart was filled with nothing but warmth. He still couldn't believe that he and his best friend had been invited to Ryker's autumn party. Ryker was by far the most popular guy in grade eleven at Meadowspice High. But unlike some popular kids, Ryker always made sure everyone in the class was included in fun activities, such as evening celebrations.

Thomas was feeling quite giddy and joyful as he stepped through the brisk October air. "So, you and Emma, huh?" He wiggled his eyebrows at his closest friend, who was walking home with him.

"Shut up," Xanthia replied, but there was a hidden smile behind their words.

"I know you like her, Xan," Thomas laughed. "It's written all over your face."

Xanthia crossed their arms and turned away from him. Thomas didn't understand their hesitation. If he had a crush, he would be happy to admit it to his best friend. But then again, he was the more outgoing of the two. Thomas could call Xanthia emo and they wouldn't even mind.

"Yo," he said, catching up to bump Xanthia's shoulder affectionately. "Just 'cause you're seventeen doesn't mean you get to be all broody."

Xanthia exhaled and started to walk backwards so they could look him in the eyes.

"Alright, *fine*." They rolled their eyes. "I do like her. A lot."

"I knew it!" Thomas exclaimed, throwing back his head in amusement. He flashed his friend a grin. "I saw the look on your face when she asked you to dance."

"Why were you spying on me, mister?" Xanthia said in a failed British accent. They raised an eyebrow. They looked so ridiculous that Thomas burst out laughing.

"Dude," Xanthia muttered, but their eyes softened the tiniest bit. They shoved their hands in their pockets and looked at him thoughtfully. "But, I guess... She's the only person I've ever met that doesn't care that I'm non-binary."

Thomas gave them a side glance.

"Except for you, of course," they giggled when they caught what he was trying to say, earning a shy beam from Thomas.

"So..." Thomas went on. "Are you guys dating now, or...?"

Xanthia stared at the ground.

"Nah," they said finally. "Not yet. I was too scared to ask her out."

"Dang it," Thomas said. He actually was really hoping they got together at some point. He was totally an awesome friend, but Xanthia probably deserved to have another person to talk to when times were hard.

"You should ask her out," he suggested with a small shrug. He paused. He wasn't sure if he was overdoing it or not.

Suddenly, a huge blast of thick air hit Thomas hard in the face. He winced as a few pine needles flew into his eyes, and he hopped around in a circle trying to flick them out.

A strange sensation flooded his stomach and lapped at his heart. There was no way to describe it except for... cold. And eerie. Like a silent scream had hit him directly in the chest.

Naturally, Thomas whirled around to see if his best friend had felt it too, but the street behind him was deserted. It was almost as though Xanthia had disappeared into thin air without a sound.

Thomas frowned. He had been telling too many horror stories, that was it. There was no reason to be scared.

Xanthia had probably gotten mad at him for pressuring them too hard. It was something that had happened a few times before, but was always resolved within a day.

The two friends' bond was too strong a rope to be sliced by a simple knife. Even if that knife was girl problems.

Confident that he could patch things up at school tomorrow, Thomas continued walking down street after street until he reached the cul-de-sac that held his pale one-story house. It certainly wasn't the homiest place to live in, but Thomas had grown up there, and had eventually begun to appreciate the house and the calm neighborhood that came with it.

His street was especially calm tonight. Almost creepily so.

It wasn't entirely abnormal for a neighborhood to seem abandoned after ten o'clock at night. Most people were probably tucked in bed with their lights out and minds far away. But Thomas still thought it would be more comforting if Mr. Bowe was out mowing his lawn or if his friend Christie was chasing her little cousins along the sidewalks.

Thomas was a people person - he fed off others' energy and enthusiasm. No people meant no one to joke around with or take comfort in.

Thomas's fingers brushed against his cool metal doorknob. He hesitated for a second and stared up at the blood moon. It was both a breathtakingly beautiful and blood chilling sight. The dark red glow seemed to be the only thing giving off light for miles out into the neighborhood, which only made it shine brighter.

Thomas let out a long breath. The world was full of so many intimidating, yet beautiful treasures.

He pushed open his front door softly, and was greeted by a gush of warm, stuffy air. The house felt just like it always had; homey, and oddly still, as though time itself slowed as soon as your foot hit the floor.

The kitchen was dark, but Thomas caught a flash of a sticky note laying on the counter. Through the shadows, he was able to make out a quick message written in his mother's slanted handwriting.

Hi THOMAS!

SO SORRY ABOUT THIS, BUT I GOT CALLED INTO WORK THIS AFTERNOON.

SHOULD BE BACK AROUND 11PM. HOPE YOU HAD AN AWESOME TIME AT THE PARTY!

LOVE,
MOM

Thomas's shoulders drooped. Another late night for his hardworking mother. And another night where work pulled him away from spending time with her like a negative magnetic force.

He pulled his sweaty gray hoodie over his head and tossed it into the corner. He walked over to the sink and poured himself a glass of cold water, chugging the entire thing before he even reached his room.

Thomas got changed quickly - buttoned-up shirt to tank top, leather pants to gym shorts. He didn't bother to slip on a pair of socks. When he did, he usually found his feet in a pool of sweat by morning.

Thomas plopped down onto his bed, staring up at the ceiling. A wide smile spread across his lips as he replayed the events of the party. It had honestly been the most fun he'd had in ages.

Thomas remembered other school parties, of course. But this one had been different. Better.

He had seen it as less of a chance to prove himself to the popular kids and more of a chance to meet new people and take part in new, fun activities.

Thomas was sad about some things, sure. It was the third night in a row where Mom wasn't able to watch Voltron with him, and he still was stuck on the thought of Xanthia running off.

But overall, Thomas was happy with his day. And he was ready to leave it off on a soft note. He pulled up the covers and settled into his pillow.

But sleep wasn't coming easy to Thomas tonight. There was a strange sense gnawing at his thoughts and blocking him from drifting off into his dreams. It was almost as though the feeling was trying to tell him that he had left a task uncompleted, a mission unsolved.

Thomas didn't know what it meant and why it was gathering in his chest, but right now it was more bothersome than strange.

"Please, I wanna go to bed," he growled to no one. A heavy silence rang through his ears. And then, he heard the tiniest noise coming from the other side of his bed. It sounded like nails scraping over glass, but with the volume minimized so only he could notice it. Whatever it was, it was causing a drop of sweat to slip down Thomas's face, almost like a tear of fright for what was going to come next.

He slowly rolled his body to his other side, praying he had just imagined the noise. But when he traced his eyes to the window, he found something he had definitely not been expecting to see.

Standing right outside Thomas's glass window, her face barely reaching the bottom panel, was a young girl.

She had ghostly white skin and curly, golden brown hair that reached as far as her shoulders. The look on her face was almost haunting - confusion, giving way to absolute despair.

The girl didn't appear to be any older than four. She clutched the hem of her frilly white dress in one tiny fist, her other palm flattened against Thomas's window.

He felt a little relieved that it wasn't some forest creature or made-up monster, but rather a child that looked like she needed help.

Thomas got out of bed and walked over to the girl on the other side of the glass, only slight hesitation in his step. He opened the window a crack so that the girl could talk to him through the screen.

"Hey there, kiddo," he grunted, scratching his neck. "You alright?"

"I'm cold," the girl whispered, a whine escaping her purpling lips. "I want my Mommy."

Thomas gave her a somber look.

"I'm really sorry, but I don't know where your mother is," he replied softly. Her head sagged on her shoulders. "But I can get you out of the cold."

"Really?" The girl's voice sounded small but powerful, like a clash of lightning on a stormy night.

"Really," Thomas smiled. He had to do something to help. The child looked like she was near freezing, cold enough that she could get hypothermia any second. He couldn't risk going out through the front door and all the way around the house. He had to get her warm, and quickly.

He sighed and then reached out to tug open his window, the side of it without a net separating them. His mom would probably kill him if she found out he had let a stranger into the house, but he felt like he needed to help her more than he had ever felt like he needed to accomplish something before in his life.

The little girl smiled gratefully as Thomas helped her through the window, but he caught something sinister behind her expression. It was almost... malicious. It reminded Thomas of a predator licking its lips before finishing off its prey.

He took a step back, rethinking his recent choices. The child, now fully in his room, stared up at him with hollow red eyes. Everything flashed before Thomas's eyes. The light, the blood moon, the scarlet glow.

When he finally took a breath and stared back down at the girl, her mouth was parted in an evil smile. A vile snickering rose from the shadows. It sounded like it was everywhere. Along the walls, in the floor, above the roof, even in Thomas's own rapidly pacing heart.

She reached a hand out to grab at his left leg, and for the first time, he realized that her pale arm had ghostly bones sticking out of it. Her skeletal fingers closed around his ankle, and he let out a terrified scream.

Thomas fully dawned on the fact that this wasn't a dream. This wasn't some weird horror story that he had made up to scare and amuse his buddies. This was real. All too real. Just like the piercing sight of the blood moon high in the starry sky.

He tumbled backwards and shook his leg violently, frantically. Somehow, he managed to free himself from the haunted girl's grip, and his sweaty fingers wrapped around the doorknob, turning it faster than he ever had before. His heart raced as he scrambled across the hallway floor. He didn't stop when he tripped over his mom's guitar case, nor when the chilling laughter started following his struggling figure into the kitchen.

Suddenly, everything stopped. The cackling was gone. So was the glow of the girl's red eyes. All that remained was a knock on the front door.

Blood pumping fast in his veins, Thomas lay a shaky hand on the doorknob.

An enormous cloud of relief washed over him when his mother revealed herself on the porch.

"Mom..." he said, voice cracking. "I-I-"

A look of concern washed over the woman's face.

"What happened, my love?"

She reached out to put an arm on Thomas's shoulder, and he collapsed into her.

His sobs and breaths didn't slow until he had completely accepted that this really was his mother, and she was here to save him from his nightmares.

"Oh, Honey," Mom soothed. "What's wrong? Did someone not treat you well at the party?"

"N-no," he whispered. "There was this-this little girl, and... sh-she wanted help, but then..."

He couldn't even make out the rest, his heart was pounding fast. He was too scared to even speak of the terrors he had just laid eyes upon.

Mom rubbed his back.

"It's okay," she said. "It's okay."

She stood up and motioned for him to follow her into the kitchen. She cracked open one of the highest cupboards and pulled out a small tea box, then filled up the kettle and turned it on. Thomas's stomach growled as the water heated up. He wiped a single tear from his cheek.

"Aw, don't worry, sweetie." Mom gave him a sweet, reassuring smile. "I don't know what happened at the party, but I'm sure you'll feel much better after a nice cup of t-"

The room went dark suddenly, as if someone had just accidentally flicked off the lights. But Thomas knew that was impossible. The closest light switch was next to the front door. Just like before, an evil laugh echoed through his skull, and a pair of red eyes appeared right in front of him.

A terrible noise - even worse than the snickering - rose from the other side of the kitchen. It was his mother's voice, he could tell. It sounded as though she had tried to scream, but had been cruelly cut off.

Thomas shouted his fear out to the moon above as the room suddenly flashed with light again, and the blood red circles vanished. Although all seemed safe, Thomas knew nothing could ever be again. Not for him.

Mom's dead body lay right before his eyes, broken, with her mouth wide open in agony. Thomas screamed, louder than he ever had before his life, and stumbled over himself to reach the landline on the counter. His legs could barely keep him up, they were wobbling so much that he almost collapsed every second.

His fingers skimmed over the number 911 and he lifted the simple black phone to his ear.

No one picked up. There was only the sound of laughter that most certainly came from a child deprived of fun and games for a lifetime.

Thomas couldn't take it anymore. He thundered out his front door and down the front steps, eyes shut so as to not scare himself further. He sprinted down his street, his feet mapping out his surroundings. He didn't know where he was running to, but any place had to be better than his house.

Thomas was inches away from ringing Mr. Bowe's doorbell when he spotted a pair of eerie red eyes closing in on him from down the street.

Thomas tried not to scream, tried not to trip, tried not to get caught up in the sight of the blood moon above, but by the time he returned to his original running pace, the supernatural little girl he had selflessly helped merely minutes ago was close enough to latch onto him.

Thomas summoned a terrified flash of energy and sped off onto the sidewalk, not even risking a glance backwards.

He hardly even felt the small, sharp pebbles on his bare feet. He didn't care about anything else in his life right now except for escaping this horror.

By the time Thomas reached the small neighborhood park, he could no longer hear the evil snickering or see the sickly figure that was following his every move.

He had lost her for now, but he was definitely not safe. Thomas leaped into the woods behind the play structure that he had loved so much when he was a kid and deep through the branches and trees. He swiftly made his way to a huge leaf pile in the middle of a clearing in the forest. He dug frantically and buried himself amongst the dead plants, seeking immediate comfort in their sweet maple smell.

Then he heard it. Crunching. Like someone was coming for him, making their way towards his hiding place. The footsteps were soft - small, almost.

Thomas knew right away that this was no ordinary scout. He braced himself to scream and rip through the trees, thick, wet tears of horror smudging his vision. He wanted to sob. To shout. But for now, he had to carry his silent pain with him, in his heart.

Slowly, to Thomas's utter relief, the footsteps faded away. He waited what was probably ten minutes before lifting his head from the leaf pile and blinking in moonlight.

Except it wasn't moonlight. It was the glow of two blood red eyes, staring into his soul, that Thomas last saw before everything went dark.

It is said that people exploring the woods or playing in the park at night during a blood moon can still hear that chilling, blood-curdling laughter. And every time, a boy, his closest friend, and his mother all go missing. Sometimes their bodies can be found under leaves in the forest. As for Thomas's body... to this day, it was never found. The people of the neighborhood fear the worst when the blood moon hangs bright over the sky. They whisper goodbyes to their loved ones and back into the shadows of their homes, scared of what is to come.