

Halloween Scene between Eternal Starling and Eternal Echoes

I wasn't sure about the blonde wig with caramel highlights. It was a little too Barbie-ish for me. A small, gold jeweled crown sat on top of the blonde wig, making me feel like a runner-up in a beauty pageant. My long flowing dress swayed around my legs, a gold filigree belt cinching in my waist. Long sleeves billowed out around the wrists, the extra fabric helping to ward off the chilly autumn air. My costume was okay...except for the color. I comforted myself with the thought that not many people could wear this shade of red.

I've always loved Halloween. The crisp fall air, the bright hues on the trees, and of course, the ability to pretend to be someone else for a night. I was looking forward to the escapism, especially considering what I'd been through in the last couple of months. I sipped my hot chocolate, almost dropping it when I felt hands cover my eyes. "Guess who?" a high-pitched voice asked.

Her perky tone gave her away. "Hey Jas." She dropped her hands as I turned around.

Zach was wearing a red t-shirt, oversized blue overalls with giant yellow buttons, a really large fake mustache, and a red cap with the letter "M" on it. His arm was wrapped around Jasmine. Her dress was cotton candy pink with a huge bell skirt, and short puffy sleeves. She was also wearing a blonde wig, crown, and white gloves. They were obviously Mario and the Princess.

"I thought you were coming as Peeta and Katniss," I said.

Jasmine bit the inside of her cheek, annoyed. "He wouldn't be Peeta."

I looked at Zach. "Why not?"

"Because I like Gale."

"You're Team Gale?" I asked, surprised. "I don't know if we can be friends."

He grinned. "I told her we could be Gale and Katniss, or something else. I suggested we go as Batman and Catwoman. She wouldn't even try on the outfit."

"Imagine that," I said dryly.

"So," Zach said, his eyes narrowed, "what are you supposed to be?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, genuinely surprised. I thought my costume was pretty clear.

Zach looked me up and down. "Are you a pumpkin? Because you look like a pumpkin."

Jasmine smacked him. “No she doesn’t!”

I narrowed my eyes, standing taller. I’d been called a marshmallow before; pumpkin wasn’t much better. “I’m Buttercup! Haven’t you ever seen *The Princess Bride*?”

He laughed. “No one’s going to understand that costume at all.”

Jasmine rolled her eyes. “Every girl here will get it. The movie’s a classic, and this is what Buttercup was wearing when Westley rescued her from her kidnappers.”

Zach looked at me again, eyes narrowed. “Maybe if the pirate guy was with her, it would make more sense.”

He was probably right. But Buttercup only had one Westley; I currently had two. I really wasn’t sure who my Westley should be, so I hadn’t told Alex or Emil about tonight...or my costume. “Maybe I’ll get a nametag,” I said sarcastically. “Hello, my name is Buttercup. You called me a pumpkin. Prepare to die.”

Zach nodded, clearly not getting the Inigo Montoya reference. “That would help.”

Jasmine looked around and smiled wide, excited. “I can’t wait for this! A haunted forest! This will be epic! Let’s go!”

The haunted forest was held every year in the mountains of Gunnison as a benefit for a local charity. Many people from the community participated, including the Western State College acting department. The event was held completely outside, which was a problem when it snowed early in the year. Luckily, the weather was cooperating tonight. A dance and party were also part of the festivities. You were supposed to go through the haunted forest to get to the dance, but for people not interested in being terrified, there was a separate party-only entrance down the road.

I drank the rest of my hot chocolate, throwing it in the recycle bin as we waited in line. When we got to the front, I paused at the entrance covered in black and purple streamers, obscuring the view inside. Considering I’d been abducted by a paranormal being a month ago, I wondered if a haunted forest was really the best choice of activities for me right now. I took a deep breath and walked through the streamers into the dark, comforting myself with the thought that unlike my reality, none of the supernatural things in the forest would actually exist.

I followed Jasmine and Zach through a mangled twist of twigs and fake spider webs. The ground was uneven, though soft red light rippled across the ground every twenty feet to help

everyone see well enough to watch the people in front of them trip. I huddled close to Jas, who huddled close to Zach. We screamed at every creak, growl, and cackle.

The first scene we came to was a hospital room. The guy on the table was pulling something that looked like spaghetti out of his stomach while a crazy doctor stood over him with a knife and asked if any of us wanted to be his patients. We declined, hurrying on ahead. The sound of a chainsaw ratcheted up. Within seconds, we were being chased by a maniac trying to cut our heads off. Zombies followed us along the path, trying to get close enough for a bite. A black winged-creature with red eyes jumped out of a tree, almost making me pee my dress. Jasmine immediately scampered onto Zach's back like he was a tree. I'd seen a documentary about the Mothman when I was a kid and been terrified of it ever since. The creature I just saw strongly resembled the "red-eyed bringer of death." I shuddered, seriously questioning my plan to come to a haunted forest without someone to scamper up myself. I had two perfectly good trees to choose from.

I could hear the party at the end of the forest, so I knew we were almost done being terrorized. We rounded a corner and suddenly light blared on our right, showcasing a woman. Scorch marks covered her long pea soup colored dress, her face unrecognizable from the burns. As if on cue, flames burst from the ground, surrounding her as she screamed. Her pain was almost tangible, the flames eerily real. I swore I could feel the heat as everything, including the woman, was engulfed. In seconds, the woman fell to the ground, nothing but ashes. I was frozen, a combination of horror and sadness flowing through me. Jas's laugh brought me out of my trance. I turned to her, thinking her reaction seemed strange. I didn't find anything about the situation funny. In fact, I was pretty rattled. Jas didn't seem to notice though; she was focused on the party ahead. Jas grabbed my arm, pulling me down the hill that would lead us out of the forest. I shook my head, looking back at the scene. It was completely dark. I wondered how they'd done that. The woman had disappeared before my eyes. Maybe there was a hole in the ground with a trap door or something. I moved my head from side to side, shaking it off. Who knew Gunnison's haunted forest had such impressive special effects wizards?

We stumbled out of the trees into a large circular area that had been cleared for the party. It was mostly college students, though I recognized some Gunnison residents too. Almost everyone was in costume. Music blared out of the speakers as we traversed the crowd to get to the refreshments.

Zach grabbed a plate, immediately piling it with pumpkin shaped sugar cookies and fun-size candy bars. “That was pretty good,” he said around a mouthful of candy corn. “Not too scary. Jas was pretty dangerous though.”

“Hey!” she said, slapping him. “I didn’t do anything.”

Zach pushed up his sleeve to show his bicep. He had scratches, and several moon shaped nail marks.

Jas rolled her eyes. “You’re just trying to show off your muscles.”

Zach grinned.

Jas grabbed a plate. “That winged thing with red eyes freaked me out!”

“Yeah,” I said, picking up a cookie. “It looked like the Mothman.”

“Yes!” Jas almost yelled. “That’s exactly what I thought!”

I’d initially watched the documentary alone, but then decided Jas needed to see it too so we could both be on alert. I thought two of us looking for a flying demon would be better than one. We got drinks, then sat at one of the tables covered with black and orange plastic.

I took a bite of my cookie, thinking about the forest, unable to get the last image of the woman out of my mind. “The burning woman was…” I stopped, trying to find the right word, “unsettling. There was something so sad about her. The actress did a really good job.”

Jas pulled her brows together. “What burning woman?”

“At the end. There was a woman with burn marks on her clothes and face. She looked like she was in a fire burning to death.”

Zach narrowed his eyes. “Did someone spike your hot chocolate?” He picked up my drink and smelled it.

I grabbed it back. “No.”

“I don’t know what you saw, but there wasn’t a burning woman,” Zach said.

I stared at him, then back at Jas. “What do you mean? She was right there.” I pointed back toward the forest. “It was the last scene we saw.”

Zach watched me as he shook his head slowly. “The last thing I saw was a cemetery scene with ghosts climbing out of graves.”

I stared at him, then looked to Jas for confirmation. She nodded her head, looking worried.

I opened my mouth, closed it, then tried again. “But—”

A thundering rumble drowned out the conversation. People went silent as every head in the area swiveled to see the source of the noise. The motorcycle was metallic black, the moonlight hitting it in a way that made the pearlcoat shimmer in and out, almost ghostly. The engine cut and mouths dropped as people stared at the helmeted stranger. A black leather jacket bulged around wide arms ending at black leather gloves. He unzipped his jacket as he stood. A black shirt was open at the neck, a few buttons undone. Black leather pants and thick black riding boots with wide square silver buckles completed the outfit. Everyone wanted to know who it was. My mouth dropped as his glossy black helmet came off revealing hair in shades of gold falling over the black mask he wore. He hadn't come by boat like a proper Dread Pirate Roberts, or even by horse or car. Instead he'd come by Harley.

Emil smiled as he walked up to us. He'd apparently taken the cheater's way out and decided to come straight to the party instead of going through the haunted forest. "Hey guys," he said, giving a head-nod to Jasmine and Zach.

"Hey," Zach nodded back.

Now that people knew he wasn't a demon on a motorcycle, the music started back up and people resumed their conversations.

"Hi, Emil," Jas said, taking a bite of chocolate. "I didn't know you were coming."

"This is the only Halloween party in a hundred miles. I didn't want to miss it."

I looked him up and down, assessing. If he was going for Dread Pirate Roberts, it was an interesting take on the costume. "So who are you supposed to be?"

He tilted his head to the side, his mouth lifting in one corner. "Your true love, silly."

"You look more like a Son of Anarchy than a fairy tale pirate."

He held my eyes. "I've seen your *Sons of Anarchy* t-shirt. I didn't think you'd mind."

I smiled at that. Emil looked a lot like Jax Teller anyway, but with the leather jacket and bike, I was a little swoony. I fought it off by asking another question. "How did you know I was dressing up as Buttercup?"

"I saw your costume in the car."

I nodded, wondering when he'd been stalking my Mustang.

"Does Alex know you're here?"

“Yeah, I do,” said a deep voice behind me. I felt lips come close to my ear. “Sorry I wasn’t here earlier,” he whispered, his breath warm on my neck. “You should have had someone to hold onto.”

I turned, staring at another man in black. True to the original costume, Alex was wearing a black silk shirt, black linen pants tucked into black lace-up boots, and a black mask that tied in the back and hung over his shoulder blades. His bright green eyes glittered behind the mask. I thought Alex and Emil’s different interpretations on the Man in Black were interesting. Alex was a purist, Emil was more imaginative. They were both appealing in their own ways. I didn’t ask how either one of them had found me. My bond with them both made me easy to track.

“How did *you* know I was dressing up as Buttercup?”

“I asked Jasmine,” Alex said.

“And she just told you?” I asked, staring at her with wide eyes. That was uncharacteristic. Because of what had happened between Alex and I when we first got together, Jasmine had a relationship with Alex that had started with love, turned to hate, and was now hovering around tolerate.

She lifted a shoulder. “He’s persistent.”

Alex glanced at her. “She’s not hard to bribe,” Alex answered. “Zach’s even easier.”

Great. “Good to know my friends are looking out for me.”

Zach raised his glass in acknowledgment, then drank the rest. “I need more,” he said, getting up from the table. “Does anyone want anything?”

“Another Snickers,” Jas said.

I stood. “I need more hot chocolate.”

“I’ll get it,” Alex said, walking off with Zach.

Emil leaned over taking my hand. He rubbed the top of it, holding my eyes as he lifted it to his lips, kissing my skin softly. “I think I’ll get some too,” he said, standing up.

It was strange to see Alex and Emil being so friendly, but I liked it better than when they were fighting. As we watched them walk away, Jas turned to me. “Buttercup only had one true love. Who’s yours?” She asked, nodding toward Alex and Emil.

I looked at the two men and sighed. “If only it were that easy to answer.”