

Tightrope

(An alternative ending to season 1 episode 20: "Control Freaks")

The circus, one would assume, is filled with exhilaration and sounds of the roaring crowd. The recognizable aroma of freshly buttered popcorn aerating the joyous environment.

Circus Gothica, on the other hand, *was no ordinary circus.*

This circus catered to those fascinated by death. Goths, emos, punks, and all in between gathered under the notorious black tent to witness a grim spectacle. With strange and gloomy acts, this circus would leave everyone questioning their existence.

The ringmaster Freakshow would only open his doors for 3 days, and then move on to the next state, but not before a bank was robbed. He was an odd, yet greedy man; always looking for a new state to deceive. He adorned himself with an ensemble of black and a slight pop of color with his blood-red scepter that never left his side.

The performers, as one could call them, were highly astray from your typical circus acts. Most of them were ghosts, but the crowd didn't need to know that. The performers obeyed their master through his staff; a staff that controlled any specter who dared to near it. The ringmaster guarded it in his hand at all times. During the day, the ghosts would complete their acts, ranging from contortion to juggling, and by night they would steal thousands of dollars from the nearest banks. To them, they felt like stringed puppets at the hands of none other than Freakshow.

There was one outlier to the scepter's control, however, the most powerful one: the half-ghost.

His job was to walk the thin, and weathered line between life and death. From one pole to the other while being several feet up in the air. For a being like him, this task was easy. Gravity wasn't a force that acted upon ghosts, or even half-ghosts. But to the crowd, he was a human performing a death defying act.

Oh the irony. *His entire existence was one death defying act.*

The incident that shaped his destiny left him split between human and ghost, a duality only 1 other person shared. He was what you could call *half-dead*, just escaping the hands of the grim reaper.

He was doomed to stay in this repetitive cycle for eternity. Forced to cross the tightrope infinitely.

Sometimes he wondered if he would ever fall into the pit below. There existed no net to ensure his safety for it added a sense of danger to his act. The half ghost, however, longed to hear screams instead of the monotony the 'oohs' and 'ahs' of the crowd had become. He desired to rid himself of this constant teetering on a mere string and plunge into the abyss of everlasting afterlife.

Of course, that would assume that he wasn't already living his afterlife, which wasn't the case. He was stuck. *Forever.*

He couldn't end his suffering; he couldn't go home. *He'd lost everything.*

Walking across the tightrope had lost its initial purpose; it was all for the amusement of others. He was the main attraction, or so he was told. In the eyes of his ringmaster, nothing could ever replace him or his specialities. Even if he wanted to leave, *he couldn't.*

The circus was currently in Amity Park, Illinois, one of its most famous locations. It was his turn to perform. Holding his newly sharpened scythe and pretending to teeter across the piece of string, he felt void of emotion. Passing through the repetitive motions did that to one. Maybe there was a rush of adrenaline in the beginning when he first started, hoping to wow the crowd with his impossible act. But nowadays he felt nothing. Writhing under the grasp of a human and his overpowering scepter left one awfully tired. The chains on his mind and body were the only things keeping him from falling into the abyss aforementioned. One by one, he gradually stepped across the rope, receiving praises from the crowd.

He could easily cross the string. The question was if he was willing to reach the other side? Leave behind everything he had once cherished and *never return again?*

Of course, he would cross to the other side. Although he regretted the action immensely. Sometimes he wondered why he ever crossed to the other side in the beginning. Even if it was absentminded and involuntary. The events of a year ago were all to blame.

Freakshow had brought his circus to the small town of Amity Park. The half-ghost and his friends had tried to stop the ringmaster from his ultimate motive, but in the end, the half-ghost was like a deer caught in the headlights, captured by the alluring hallucination of the scepter.

He could only remember bits and pieces of how he came to meet the circus master, since much of his past memories had faded, but the events of that horrific day were like a lucid dream.

Atop of the fast moving train with two humans and several ghosts, there was a hint of immorality in his actions, but that didn't phase him. His mind was under the spell of the staff, following its every command. He should've listened to that sense. Maybe he could've prevented this.

He sped over the train cars, jumping to catch the scepter which had slipped from Freakshow's hand. Once in his grasp, the half-ghost looked up to the screeching of several people.

On a separate train car stood the performers with an African American boy pinned underneath the arms of a large, muscular ghost. To his left was a girl with raven hair screaming at him to give her the scepter. Finally, to his right was his master Freakshow, ordering him to return the staff at once. At the time, he didn't recognize that the humans were his best friends. *Big mistake.* His mind was torn between giving the scepter to a stranger or his master.

Logically, he handed the scepter to the circus ringmaster, and then turned around to smile deviously at the girl. He still remembers her expression of disbelief when he betrayed her. The way her eyes begged him to stop this absurdity, to break the curse of the staff. She pleaded with him to remember who he was, who he became, and how she loved him. Even the other boy, whose words were muffled by the ghost performer but still heard, urged the half-ghost to see his wrongdoing.

The train was racing faster now, crossing over a bridge hoisted 500 feet above a frozen river. It was getting harder to maintain stability atop of the train. The wintry breeze blew past everyone as the tension heightened.

Instead of apologizing to the girl, like any reasonable human being - or ghost - would do, *he pushed her.*

Worst of all, *he enjoyed the attack.*

While he was he was physically restrained by the staff at this time, his true emotions were not. What about the incident did he relish?

Was it seeing one of his best friends plummet hundreds of feet into the icy reservoir below?

Was it hearing her ear piercing screams, knowing that he could've saved her?

Was it the fact that she would still be here if he had broken the spell cast on his mind?

Was it seeing the horrifying expression on his *other* best friend?

Was it hearing his screams and sobs that half-ghost didn't do anything to save her?

Was it that wretched feeling that sat at the bottom of his stomach as he smirked at the sight of her body creating ripple of waves in the cold, cold waterway?

Was it turning around and grabbing the African American boy who screamed at the grip?

Was it letting go off his arm and watching him accept the same fate as the girl?

Or maybe it was knowing that he could *never return back*. That everything he had once took for granted was gone before his eyes.

All because he couldn't shake off the dread of not being accepted.

The scepter's power worked in a strange way. It triggered one's greatest fear and used it to demand them to complete their master's bidding. The more one resisted the staff's power, the more the scepter took over, warping their mind to believe that their actions were ethical. In his case, his duality of human and ghost would be considered freakish and abnormal by those of Amity Park. The town hated his super alter-ego personality Phantom. Even his parents, addicted to discovering every little detail about ghosts, were determined to surgically dismantle him "molecule by molecule". No one would ever accept him for being half dead, his existence was in vain. The scepter used this knowledge to justify *murdering* his only friends.

It was his greatest fear, losing everyone to his ghostly half, and *he had done exactly that*.

When he'd heard the news a week later of a hiker discovering a frozen body in the river, he immediately knew who the body belonged to. How had the hiker not noticed the other lifeless body floating only a couple of feet away? The one that belonged to the African American boy and once best friend? The one that had fallen from the moving train atop the bridge just minutes after the girl?

He didn't want to push them, he was forced to. *Forced to push, and forced to watch*.

When her body was found, everyone assumed the same fate for the rest of the trio. They believed the friends had taken their lives in an attempt to stop their suffering from being social outcasts.

If only that was the truth.

At least they would be together in the afterlife, *everyone thought*.

The trio had a combined funeral, where each of the parents sobbed till their voices were no longer audible. Much sorrow was shared between the guests, even if many of them barely knew the trio. None of the citizens in Amity Park ever cared for the three, not even their parents, but the trio liked it like that. The less noticeable, the easier it became to hide secrets.

And the trio had *plenty* of secrets.

He wished he had gone to his own funeral, to see the people he had grown up with one last time, but sadly he was busy halfway across the world, performing yet again another death-defying act. He only knew of the events from the news. The same news where his alter ego was constantly pictured as a criminal because his ringmaster obliged him to rob another bank.

He wondered what his family would say if they saw him now. His parents certainly would stand in disbelief, claiming their sweet boy was dead, that the boy standing before them was an imposter. On the other hand, his sister might have understood. She was always accepting of him, watching him like an older sister should. But now he would never get to see his family ever again. Soon, his memories of them would fade, leaving him with a horrible sense of guilt and no way of explaining it.

He'd grown used to that dull ache in the back of his mind. It stood as a reminder as to who was controlling him. He didn't even have power in his own body; his thoughts were never his. But at times like these, when he was performing for a whole crowd to see, his thoughts were the *clearest* they could ever be. The farther from the staff, the easier it was to be his true self. But this didn't mean distancing himself from the staff made it easier to escape its total control.

Most of his truest thoughts were plagued by his best friends. To know that they, who would risk their lives for him in a heartbeat as they clearly did, were forever gone, left him with no choice than to stay. How could he continue living without his motivation? The people who had been there for him through thick and thin. The two who helped him see past his wrongs?

He didn't deserve them and *they deserved better than him*.

He couldn't return home with the guilt and shame that enveloped his being. He accepted his fate that he was destined to repay for what he did to his friends. Endure this tedious cycle of crossing on a thin strand.

And the worst part? Freakshow *knew* the half-ghost had lost his past life the moment he gave the staff to him. The half-ghost was loyal because there was no turning back. Sometimes the

ringmaster would purposely loosen the scepters control so the half-ghost could feel that wave of remorse all over again.

Sometimes he wished he could go back in time and reverse the events of that day.

Sometimes he wished he was in his friends position. He preferred it be him plummeting to his death than his friends; they deserved none of what was given to them.

Withdrawing from his thoughts, the half-ghost noticed that he had stopped walking along the string. The crowd was confused, silence emanating throughout the tent. Few dared to whisper about the sudden pause. The dull pain in the half-ghost's head suddenly grew stronger, entrenching his every fiber. It urged him to move forward, to continue and reach the finish line on the other side of the tightrope. The staff demanded him to hurry because the owner had a bank to rob later that night.

For the first time, the half-ghost attempted to resist its impulse.

This prompted the ache to grow stronger, encompassing his mind. He was close to falling, swinging back and forth on the string. With the little consciousness he could gain control of, he compelled his body to take a step backward.

There was a slight glimmer of hope. Maybe he could go back. *Maybe he could see his friends once again.*

The pain that surrounded his mind became too much to endure and he faltered on the delicate string. He could barely hear the gasps from the crowd as his arms flailed, releasing the scythe that was previously clenched in his right hand

One moment he was on the line, the next he was falling off.

Just like his friends.

Falling, falling, falling, it seemed as the ground was never to come. Its absence left him terrified. Would he ever hit rock bottom? Was he doomed to plummet for eternity?

He could easily stop himself from hitting the ground, but that would risk his identity and he couldn't give in to his fear now.

His ears filled with the ear splitting screams and sobs of his friends, creating a cacophony of appalling noises. At some point he had closed his eyes to relieve himself of the terrible agony in

his ears, however he was only met with the faces of his best friends in their last moments of living.

The noise grew louder and louder as he felt as if he was falling faster and *faster*.

His eyes shot open instantly, coming face to face with a reflection of himself in the mirror. He assumed Freakshow had overpowered him and made him complete his act, then brought him here.

Staring at his own sleep deprived appearance, he was only reminded of the unpleasant expressions of his friends.

When would he be free from the guilt that followed him around like a shadow?

When would he escape this horrible torture that chained him in like an desperate animal?

When would he see his friends again?

He wished an opportunity would come along to apologize to his friends for his grave mistake. *But the thing was, that time would never come.*