

Welcome Back

The tents, painted blinding hues of yellow and red, were beginning to fade. Rusty carts of rotting candy floss and teeth decaying treats line the rugged street. Soft string lights glowing ghoulishly in the night appear more haunting than the dark itself. A whirlwind of nostalgia engulfs me in a sea of memories from when my father and I walked in here holding hands. I wish he could've seen my brother in the circus one last time, but old age got the best of him. Oh well, it's not like he could've seen Ian perform anyway. Rumors spread, years ago, that he fell around forty feet from his platform. His death still sends cold shivers down my spine.

Entering the abandoned big top felt like a cold whip of ominous energy. Screeching sounds pierce my ears in the sunless tent, as a distant **ululating** startles me. My visible breath in the cold quivers as I waltz past towering trapezes, envisioning the fall of my brother. *How did that stupid net not catch him?* The whispering voices grow louder, leading me further into the depths of madness. Empty steel cages that once captured entertaining beasts now contain their last breaths and scattered bones. Cut-off tightropes twirling and untwisting aimlessly hang from the endless sky of the tent. One of them tangles around a lifeless neck, tainted purple and pained.

Boxed contortionists stuck sideways with sunken eyes. Pale faces, stale and still with stomachs **gruesome** to look at. Slashed and sliced in the shape of a smile, leaking **ichor** stains the ground beneath their feet. Broken and bent unicycle wheels strangely spin, without a breeze in the drafty air. Rainbow curly wigs rest on the ground, ripped off the heads of their owners. White dried and cracked face paint smears their scarred skin with permanent smiles etched onto their frightened faces. *I guess someone wasn't a fan of the circus. Who would do this? And why would they leave their victims here?*

My curiosity turns into fear, yet something tells me to keep going. Fallen acrobats rest, tied and trapped in their silk ribbons below the platforms looming above. My shaking feet force me up the ladder overlooking all the dead acts below. Another cold corpse, fragile and grey sits at the edge, but, something's different about this one. I inch closer to the body, immediately recognizing those closed eyes. Ian. "Who did this?" my strained and angered voice thunders.

A heavy hand covers my mouth, moving me closer to the edge.

“You must be Ian’s brother. I’ve heard so much about you. Welcome back!” a twisted smile creeps onto the ringmaster’s face. “You see, my boy, to have the greatest circus, I need the greatest performers. Dead or alive...tragic isn’t it? I know the circus has changed since your last visit, but please enjoy the final act!” His cloaked arms heave me over the edge, sending a deadly shock through my body. The show was finally over.