

THE DM TOOL CHEST

# CIRCUS OF THE DAMNED



ENTER THE MYSTERIOUS CIRCUS  
AND UNCOVER THE SECRET OF THE DARK CURSE



## CIRCUS OF THE DAMNED



*Circus of the Damned* is a Fifth Edition adventure intended for **three to five characters of 4th to 6th level** and optimized for **four characters with an average party level (APL) of 5**. A traveling circus is cursed with undeath

after stealing a devil's treasure. They now roam the lands searching for the gold coins and the pieces of their souls trapped inside them. This adventure location occurs in the Freelands campaign setting but fits any existing campaign with only a few modifications and name changes.

### BACKSTORY

Starkspell's Elysium Circus has traveled from coast to coast and performed its acts for the high-born and the low. For the last three decades, the eponymous Ringmaster Julian Starkspell has led the motley troupe of acrobats, clowns, magicians, exotic animal tamers, and other performers. They roam from place to place, appearing as if by magic, and put on a grand show before disappearing just as quickly. However, something has changed in the last few years. The performances have become darker and more hair-raising than before, often ending up more frightening than

entertaining. After the circus leaves each town, a dark pall is left hanging in the air, and a heavy sense of doom presses on the townspeople's shoulders. There are also reports of people going missing—presumably to join the circus—and never heard from again.

In actuality, the circus has been cursed due to their greed and lust for fame and fortune. A few years ago, the performers found themselves hired to give a show at the wedding of a wealthy noble in Haven, the capital city of the Freelands. Not content with the promised pay, the circus performers took it upon themselves to make a plan to steal from the wealthy noble during the wedding. The heist was successful, and the circus stole away into the night with a chest stuffed with a thousand gold coins they found hidden in the noble's bedchamber. The following months were filled with carousing and spending the stolen treasure during their travels, never perceiving the curse on the gold that was now corrupting them all until it was too late.

An archdevil gifted the gold to the noble who had sold his soul in exchange for the wealth. As each coin is spent, so too is a piece of the spender's soul, trapped within the gold. With each missing piece, the victim falls further under the curse until their soul is completely gone and they remain an empty husk. The performers appear as they always have by day, but at

night, the curse takes hold, and their greed transforms them into skeletons, ghouls, and other undead creatures. They take no more pleasure in the things they once enjoyed, food turns to ash in their mouths, and wine no longer quenches their thirst—the curse has stolen their joy of life. The cursed circus now travels the land performing their acts both day and night, hoping in vain that it will rekindle the spark they have lost. The gold coins call out to the performers, leading them from town to town to collect them one by one. Once they find a coin, the troupe puts on a show and encourages the townspeople holding it to spend it on them, releasing the piece of the soul trapped inside, often killing them afterward to protect their secret. And so the circus roams, hunting for the gold and their lost souls.

## ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The characters visit Starkspell's Elysium Circus and notice the shows are a bit more disturbing than they should be. After visiting the different acts, speaking with the performers, and participating in some games of skill and chance, the characters learn there is more to the circus than meets the eye. The performers give the characters some unique coins and invite them to the "special midnight performances."

## ADVENTURE HOOKS

Here are a few ways to get your characters hooked into this adventure:

***Mysterious Arrival.*** A mysterious circus popped up just outside the town where the characters are staying. None of the performers have ventured into town or even outside of the circus grounds. Perhaps this is a chance for some light-hearted fun?

***Strange Rumours.*** A strange and dark circus has been reported traveling around the local region. Rumors of disappearing carnival-goers and strange nighttime occurrences are traveling from town to town. The characters have heard these rumors, and their patron has requested they investigate after a loved one disappeared while visiting the circus.

***Missing Villagers.*** Sheriff Anna Willow of Ashwood hires the characters to find a family that went missing after a strange circus appeared outside of town one day and disappeared the next. She's offered a substantial reward if the characters track down the traveling performers and discover the family's fate.

## RUNNING THE LOCATION

This sandbox-style location has two distinct parts determined by when the characters visit the circus grounds. During the day, they can enjoy (or be baffled by) the sights and acts the circus offers, as described in



the daytime activities section of the location descriptions. Once the sun sets, the curse awakens, and the circus grounds transform into a hellscape. The characters' decisions influence the order of events as they unfold. Once the reason for the characters' visit to the circus has been established (see Adventure Hooks), they can visit the circus grounds at their leisure.

## ABOUT THE CURSE

The curse affects not only the circus performers but the animals and circus structures as well. During their night-time performances, the circus pretends the curse is illusions mixed with clever costumes to create a "dark circus" performance opposite their daytime routines. The bright and cheerful displays of the daytime turn into a macabre showcase of undead under the moonlight. Colorful cloth turns ragged and dull, polished metal becomes spotted with rust, and decay touches everything within the circus grounds. These changes to the inanimate objects are purely aesthetic and do not change any of their properties. As noted in their descriptions below, the performers are transformed into their undead counterparts at sunset.

## THE CURSED COINS

The center of each face shows a worn profile of an unknown ancient king crowned with a laurel wreath. The edges of the hexagonal gold coins are etched with tiny text that spells out the phrase "beauty awakens the soul to act" in Infernal. As the spectators spend cursed coins on a performer to see their act, a small part of the soul is returned to that performer. This return is a euphoric experience for them and has been the driving motivation to continue their performances. Their eagerness to please a paying customer can just as quickly turn to rage when gold is spent on other acts. This rage has led to more than a few townsfolk disappearing as they cross the wrong performers' paths.

## CIRCUS OF FEAR

While the curse has stolen the pleasure from the performers' usual enjoyments, it has left them one thing from which they can derive feelings: causing fear in others. In a horrible twist, the rush the performers once received from bringing joy and wonder to their guests can now only be felt when the crowd is terrified. This

numbness leads to lackluster performances during the day and horrifying experiences at night.

## DESTROYING THE CIRCUS

If any part of the circus is destroyed (including the performers, animals, or structures), it is completely renewed by the curse 24 hours later. The only way to free the circus of the curse is to have each of the cursed gold coins spent on the performers' acts. Due to the nature of the curse, these coins can only be spent willingly; stealing them back will not release the souls trapped inside. Occasionally, the performers will steal the coins from those unwilling to spend them and give them to travelers as "tickets" and "prizes" to their special midnight shows. The only way to lift the curse is to track down the remaining coins spread throughout the region which is outside of this adventure's scope.

## THE PERFORMERS

The circus has fifty members divided between the performers and circus hands, although they are all responsible for pitching in to help when needed. This number changed while folks joined the traveling circus for brief periods before leaving for other pursuits. Since the curse has taken its hold, the performers have shunned adding new members to protect their secrets. The following descriptions are a general overview of each of the important NPCs that the characters may encounter in the circus. More specific information regarding encounters with each performer will be detailed in the description text of the location.

### ROLEPLAYING THE PERFORMERS

Not all of the performers and circus members genuinely wish to harm their guests. The named performers, as described above (see The Performers), typically want to perform their acts (as defined in their location descriptions below) in exchange for the cursed gold. However, certain performers have succumbed to the curse more than others and while some only wish to instill fear in the guests for fun, others enjoy killing them for the rush.

## THE RINGMASTER

Julian Starkspell is the charismatic and gaudy Master of Ceremonies and eponymous owner of Starkspell's Elysium Circus. The gnome's giant ego and boisterous attitude make him seem larger than life, and his bright blue hair demands attention wherever he goes, aided by his *ringmaster's top hat* (see Appendix). Starkspell stays in the Big Top (area 10), where he introduces each act to the waiting crowd. Julian is quick to give special attention and syrupy praise to characters he knows have cursed gold.

Julian's greedy nature led the circus down the path to where they find themselves today. He has avoided taking the blame for it through smooth talk, but there

have already been those—such as the strongman Boris—who feel that their predicament rests squarely on the gnome's shoulders.

**Wanx the Weasel.** An awakened **weasel** (under the effects of an *awaken* spell) named Wanx is Julian's constant companion. He is a cruel creature who delights in tormenting guests by stealing from them.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** Julian's flesh disappears to reveal a walking skeleton dressed in ragged ringmaster's garb. He carries a large spellbook and uses the **mage** stat block. Wanx turns into a rotting and decaying zombie. The creature type of both Julian and Wanx is Undead during the night.

## ACROBATS

The Many Marvelous Manacorns are acrobats who have been with the circus since the beginning. Each wears a distinctive leotard adorned with sparkling rhinestones. The members of the "family" have changed over the years, and—while they all profess to be related—they are a diverse group of genders and races of all types. They all have a preening attitude, especially while performing. The acrobats perform on the tightrope near the South Gate (area 1) or on the trapeze and other aerial displays in the Big Top (area 10).

Mishania Manacorn is a slender and sharp-tongued dragonborn with sky blue scales who leads the family through her dominating personality. She is strong-willed and dedicated to her craft, pushing those around her to be their best. Mishania has secretly plotted to take over from Sparkspell for years but has failed to gather enough support to oust the well-loved ringmaster.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The acrobats' bright leotards turn into rags, and they appear as hunched and twisted **ghouls**.

## ANIMAL TAMERS

Amalace and Rizimar Helenios are a married pair of drow exotic animal trainers who joined the circus just a few years before the curse took hold. They are a reclusive and aloof pair who spend more time with their animals than the other performers. Amalace was having a secret affair with the human knife thrower Sarafina until the curse stole their joy. Rizimar has long suspected something but has no proof. They care for a highly trained zoo of exotic animals (see Circus Animals table, page 11) and perform at the Exotic Animal Show (area 8).

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The curse turns the tamers into forlorn **ghosts**, and their animals appear skeletal with decaying and rotting flesh as if they were corpses left in the sun too long. The animals keep their stat block as listed in the Circus Animal Table (see page 11), and their type changes to Undead.

## BARKERS

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A trio of garishly dressed carnival barkers with face paint and walking on stilts roam the circus grounds. The three triplet dwarven brothers are named Thordril, Hamdril, and Ordriil. They delight in confusing other people who cannot tell them apart, often pretending to be insulted even if someone calls them by their actual name. Their tone is upbeat as they talk up the different acts around the circus, but it clashes with their sardonic descriptions of the performances.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The curse changes each of the brothers' appearance into pale and sharp-toothed **vampire spawn** (with a fly speed of 30 ft.) with leathery wings growing from their backs to replace their stilts.

## CLOWNS

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A troupe of a dozen nameless and mute human and halfling clowns circle the Big Top and choose random groups of circus goers to perform their over-the-top shenanigans. Dressed in brightly colored and ill-fitting outfits, they leap and tumble while pretending to trip and fall to invoke laughter—their slapstick comedy routine borders on creepy with their intense staring from soulless eyes. Besides tumbling, the clowns ride unicycles while juggling painted wooden balls, perform sleight of hand tricks with flowers and colorful handkerchiefs, and perform skits through miming.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The curse turns the clowns into horrifying **zombies**. Unlike the other performers, their clothing remains bright and flashy, in stark contrast to the decay prevalent in the circus at night. Rows of shark-like teeth fill their mouths, and their inky black eyes are missing the whites. These terrifying creatures roam the grounds at night, looking for victims to eat.

## FORTUNE TELLER

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Violca Pike is a lavender-skinned tiefling with piercing emerald eyes and luxurious black hair in tight ringlets. She joined the circus a few years before the curse took hold and just after a business rival killed her husband. Changing her name and joining the circus after a chance meeting with Julian Starkspell, Violca left her past behind, taking on the role of a fortune teller and mystic. The tiefling hides behind hooded veils and keeps to her incense-filled tent, preferring to be alone with her thoughts and tarot cards unless customers visit.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** Due to her tiefling nature, the curse does not affect any change in Violca's appearance. While she still suffers from the weight of losing her soul to the coins, she remains physically unchanged. This has caused some bitterness between her and the other performers. She uses the **priest** stat block, and her Divine Eminence ability deals psychic damage instead of radiant.

## KNIFE THROWER

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Sarafina Wolmae is a half-elven woman with short, spiky blond hair and dazzling blue eyes. Thin as a whip and deceptively strong, Sarafina is an expert knife thrower and thief. Unbeknownst to the rest of the performers, she convinced Starkspell to attempt the theft of the cursed gold that wended up putting them in the position they are now. She hides this fact from everyone, including her lover Amalace Helenios, the animal tamer.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** Sarafina becomes a **wight** with a brace of throwing knives in place of a longsword and longbow. She can multiattack with three knives, has a +4 bonus to attacks with these knives, and each blade has a range of 20/40 feet and deals 4 (1d4+2) piercing damage.

## HANDS

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Many manual laborers who do not perform in any of the acts roam the circus grounds, assisting the performers. These hands are the most diverse group and come from various backgrounds, each with their own story and reason for joining the circus. During the day, these hands are dressed simply and do not stand out from the crowds as the performers do. They rarely speak and stay out of the way until the night falls and their presence is more noticeable. The hands are incredibly loyal to Julian Starkspell and do his bidding without question.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The hands turn into **skeletons** when night falls. They each wear a distinctive black mask that completely covers their faces but fails to hide the glowing red fire in their eye sockets.

## STRONGMAN

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Boris Kozachuk is the circus' lycanthrope strongman. While he is known as "The Mountain of Muscle," Boris is also a brilliant and introverted man. A former soldier, he contracted lycanthropy during his military career and was forced out of the army. Even though his strength as a **wereape** (see Appendix) is immense, society shuns him because of his appearance. He found his home in the circus, and even though he and Julian are at odds over the current state, he is very protective of the other performers.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** Boris' appearance changes at night to be a zombified version of his hybrid form. He gains the following changes to his stat block:

- His type becomes Undead.
- **New Trait: Undead Fortitude.** If damage reduces Boris to 0 hit points, he must make a Constitution saving throw with a DC of 5 + the damage taken, unless the damage is radiant or from a critical hit. On a success, Boris drops to 1 hit point instead.



## STARKSPELL'S ELYSIUM CIRCUS

The circus travels by large, brightly colored horse-drawn wagons accompanied by the sound of music. Before the curse, this music was joyful, and the performers' voices would lift in song. Now, those cheery songs have turned into haunting melodies that follow the mournful procession. Once the circus reaches its destination, they seek out a large clearing nearest the village or town. The wagons break open, and the teams get to work setting up the tents and game booths. In the center of it all is a

three-poled striped tent they call the Big Top. There is a single entrance to this tent and

### GENERAL FEATURES

These general features are prominent throughout the circus grounds unless otherwise noted in the area descriptions.

**Ceilings, Floors, and Walls.** Tents are constructed of thick ashwood poles and colorful canvas panels. The average tents are 10 feet high over thick carpets on the natural dirt or grass terrain.

**Doors.** The wagon doors are constructed of seasoned wood, and each has AC 15, 18 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. Locked

doors can be picked with a successful DC 12 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or they can be forced open with a successful DC 15 Strength check.

**Lights.** The tents are well-lit by oil lanterns that have multi-colored glass panels. Skylights in the tops of the Big Top also let in sunlight during the day.

**The Curse.** The circus deteriorates in the blink of an eye once the sun drops, turning from a bright and cheerful carnival to a nightmare of rot and decay. This curse affects everything associated with the circus while the sun is down and only returns to regular appearances at dawn.

## RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

Some of the performers roam the circus grounds and can be encountered in different locations as the characters travel. As each area is visited, where it calls for a random encounter, roll a d20 and on a roll of 18 or higher, roll a d6 and consult the Circus Encounters Table. During the day, these encounters are benign, if creepy, but these random encounters are hostile at

**CIRCUS ENCOUNTERS TABLE**

d6	Encounter
1-2	1d3+1 clowns ( <b>zombies</b> )
3	1d3+1 circus hands ( <b>skeletons</b> )
4	1d2 exotic animals (roll on the Circus Animal Table, page 11)
5	1d3+1 acrobats ( <b>ghouls</b> )
6	1 circus barker ( <b>vampire spawn</b> )

night, and they attack the characters on sight.

## CIRCUS PRIZES

Prizes can be won at various games of skill and chance throughout the circus. When the adventure text calls for a prize to be won, have a player roll the dice referred to at that event and consult the Circus Prize Table to give them their reward based on the time of day.

## VISITING THE CIRCUS

When the characters visit the circus for the first time during the day, read aloud the following:

The sound of cheerful circus music fills the air long before the brightly colored tents can be seen around the upcoming bend. A patchwork of colorful canvases surrounds the circus grounds as a makeshift fence. Pennants atop tentpoles peaking above the fence flap in a wind that also carries with it the smells of fresh baked sugary snacks. A wooden gate holding a large, painted sign states this is "The Most Magnificent and Marvelous Starkspell's Elysium Circus," and a line is forming to buy tickets from a small booth.

When the characters visit the circus at night, read aloud the following:

The sound of circus music still fills the air, but the cheerful tone it once held has been replaced with a manic and discordant style. The moonlight appears to have washed away the bright colors of the canvas panels, and they now appear old and tattered, barely hanging on to the wooden frame. The glittering paint that adorned the sign above the gate is dull and lackluster. A dark figure is now at the booth, its head covered by a black hood that hides its face but not the red glow of its fiery eyes.

## KEYED LOCATIONS

The following descriptions correspond to the keyed locations on the provided map of the circus grounds. Some areas list daytime and nighttime sections.

### 1. SOUTH GATE

This gate is the main entrance and only allows one-way traffic into the circus. A circus hand (see page 5) sells tickets out of a small wooden booth for 2 sp (daytime) or 1 gp (nighttime) per person. If a character has a cursed coin, their entry is free. The circus hand will also provide a free map of the circus grounds (see Player Handout: Circus Map, page 15). Once past the gate, the entirety of the circus grounds is spread out before the characters.

The entrance opens onto a broad path lined with small wooden poles wrapped in bright ribbons. The trail leads northeast directly under a tightrope (area 2) and

**CIRCUS PRIZE TABLE**

d20	Daytime Prize	Nighttime Prize
1-4	A pouch of ten peppermint candies.	A pouch of soil, worms, and beetles.
5-7	A small, wooden clown doll.	A softly glowing glass jar full of a cloudy liquid and an unidentifiable mass of flesh and meat floating inside.
8-16	2d4 cursed coins.	2d4 cursed coins.
17-19	A goldfish in a clear glass bottle.	A straw-filled canvas doll whose clothes randomly change when its not being observed.
20	A three-foot-tall plush purple dragon toy.	Make a roll on a level-appropriate magic item table in the <i>PHB</i> .

heads towards the Big Top (area 10) in the center of the circus grounds.

**Encounter: Random Roamers.** Roll on the Circus Encounters Table on page 7 to determine who the characters first encounter entering the circus grounds.

**Daytime.** If the characters leave through this gate, the circus hand gives each character two cursed coins and tells them to come to the special midnight showing.

**Nighttime.** The circus hand stops the characters if they attempt to leave without visiting the Big Top first. He offers to help them pay the entry fee if they are short and hands each character a cursed coin.

## 2. TIGHTROPE

A path leads directly between a pair of thick poles with colorful animals painted on them, reaching thirty feet high, and under a thirty-foot-long thin metal wire stretched taut between them. To the north are a cluster of brightly covered wagons, and to the east sits a blue and black tent decorated with silvery mystic symbols.

**Encounter: The Marvelous Manacorns.** At any given time of day or night, there are 1d4+2 acrobats (see page 4) performing on the tightrope. They somersault and perform balancing acts stacked on top of each other for the crowds.

The acrobats appear somber with a forced cheerfulness that can be noticed by a character with a passive Perception of 12 or higher. The acrobats will laugh off any attempts to talk about anything other than their act and invite the characters to see their primary performance at the Big Top (see area 10).

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The acrobats are more aggressive in their act during the night, compounded by



their undead appearance. They choose a character at random to invite up onto the wire to perform with them and grow hostile if the character refuses. A determined character is placed on the shoulders of an acrobat who walks across the wire. Halfway through, the acrobat shrugs them off, and the character must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw to catch the wire or take 10 (3d6) bludgeoning damage from the fall.

## 3. CIRCUS WAGONS

The circus keeps their painted wagons in this clearing along with their horses. The doors to each wagon are unlocked and contain random odds and ends of each performer's costumes, make-up, and props. If the characters search a wagon, roll a d10 and consult the

**CIRCUS WAGON TREASURE TABLE**

d10	Encounter
1-3	Enough makeup and odds and ends for a disguise kit.
4-5	1d10 pieces of carved wood painted to look like silver coins mixed in a pouch with 2d6 real sp.
6	A brass kazoo shaped in the shape of a crouched dragon. A character proficient with Flutes or Pan Flutes gains a +1 bonus to Performance checks made with this kazoo.
7	A map case full of schematics and sketches for magic tricks and other acts.
8	A tiny plush owlbear dressed in a ringmaster outfit.
9	A slender black wand that shoots a stream of flower petals when the command word "Presto" is spoken. The command word is etched in silver in Elvish on the wand.
10	1d3 cursed coins.

Circus Wagon Treasure table to determine what they find.

**Encounter: Random Roamers.** Roll on the Circus Encounters Table on page 7 to determine who the characters encounter in this location. These roamers are resting in between performances and keeping an eye on the wagons.

**Starkspell's Wagon.** The largest and gaudiest of the wagons is painted in purple and gold and belongs to the ringmaster Julian Starkspell. The door is locked with an *arcane lock* spell that can be bypassed by a character using thieves' tools who succeeds on a DC 25 Dexterity check or with a *knock* spell or similar magic effect. Julian keeps the key to the door on his person (see area 10). The wagon is under the effects of an *alarm* spell that mentally alerts Julian if the wagon is entered by anyone other than himself.

A wagon search uncovers a journal detailing the history of the circus and the curse (see Backstory). A character actively searching who succeeds on a DC 20 Intelligence (Investigation) check uncovers a secret panel in the wagon's floor. The hidden compartment is lined with lead that blocks any magic effect, such as a

*detect magic* spell. Inside the compartment are the 564 cursed coins that the circus has already collected and had spent on them. These coins will instantly draw the attention of all of the cursed performers if removed.

## 4. CARNIVAL BOOTHS

A broad clearing sits ringed by wooden booths with colorfully displayed signs and banners declaring the different types of foods and carnival games at each. Standing in the center of them all is a broad-shouldered dwarf dressed in a flashy outfit and walking on stilts beneath bright orange pants. "Come one, come all!" he cries and motions towards the onlookers, "Step right up and try to win a prize! You probably won't, but you can still try!"

The carnival barker (see page 4) is one of the three brothers that roam the circus. Every time the characters revisit this location, it will be a different triplet.

**Encounter: Random Roamers.** Roll on the Circus Encounters Table on page 7 to determine who the characters encounter in this location.

### GAMES OF CHANCE

Here are a few examples of carnival games available to be played. Feel free to add your ideas to give the characters more options. If a character wins, have them roll a d20 on the Circus Prize Table on page 7 to determine what they receive. These games cost 2 cp to play during the day and 1 cursed coin at night.

**Crown the King.** In this game, a character must throw a small wooden gold-painted ring at a crate filled with wine bottles bearing the image of a king on them. A character that succeeds on a DC 17 Dexterity (Sleight

of Hand) check will get the ring on the neck of the bottle and win a prize.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The curse turns the wine bottles into decapitated heads, and the rings become full-sized brass crowns.

**Tag the Target.** A tiny wooden target is set on a pulley system that makes it move back and forth along a track. A character has twenty seconds to throw as many sand-filled canvas balls as they can at the moving target while a circus hand works the pulleys. Each ball is an improvised thrown weapon, and the target has AC 15. For every five successful hits, the character wins a prize.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The canvas balls turn into warm, bloody organs that appear freshly removed from a body and splatter when they strike the target.

**Catch the Greased Pig.** This game is set in a small, mud-filled pen in which the character has 5 rounds to grapple an oiled-up **boar** and restrain it for a single round. A character that succeeds wins a prize.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The boar becomes a **wereboar** that fights back with unarmed nonlethal strikes. Defeating this opponent earns the character a +5 bonus to their price roll.

## 5. STRONGMAN STAGE

A sizable wooden stage holds a tall wooden pole with bright red dash marks painted every few feet to mark the distance up to fifty feet. Attached to the top of the pole is a brass bell tied to a taut rope leading down and through a wooden ball resting on a large lever. Standing next to the lever is a massively muscled and extremely hairy man twirling an oversized wooden mallet in the air as he poses for the crowd.



**Encounter: The Strongman.** Boris the **wereape** (see Strongman page 5) puts on a show here to swing the hammer onto the lever and hit the bell at the top of the pole with the wooden ball that rides up the rope. He also picks up small children and people to lift them over his head and other feats of strength such as arm-wrestling. The characters can choose between arm-wrestling or the hammer strength test, and a character that bests Boris can roll a d20 on the Circus Prize Table on page 7. A character that wishes to compete against Boris must pay 1 gp during the day or 1 cursed coin at night.

### ARM-WRESTLING

This test is a pure Strength check between Boris and the challenging character with the higher roll winning that round. The winner is the best out of 5 rounds.

### HAMMER STRENGTH TEST.

The challenger and Boris take turns swinging a large wooden mallet onto the lever to hit the bell at the top with the wooden ball. The lever has AC 8, and the height the ball reaches is the participant's attack roll minus 10, with the result multiplied by 5 feet. (Ex: Attack roll of 16 - 8 = 8 x 5 feet = 40 feet). Each participant earns 1 point for every 10 feet reached, and the points double if they hit the bell at the 50-foot mark. The participant with the most points after three attempts wins.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The wooden ball turns into a skull, and the bell changes into a ribcage that rattles loudly if the skull makes it inside.

## 6. NORTH GATE

This gate is the main exit and only allows one-way traffic out of the circus through the large canvas-covered doors. Four **clowns** and a **circus hand** (see page 5) watch over the gate to make sure no one sneaks in and entertain guests on their way out.

**Daytime.** The hand will be particularly interested in the characters leaving the circus. If they do not have any cursed coins (see page 3), the hand pulls them aside to invite them to a "special midnight performance" and gives each character 3 cursed coins. He hints that the prizes at night are worth far more than the trinkets earned during the day.

**Nighttime.** This exit is barred and closed during the night, and its guardians are hostile to any who attempt to leave without Julian's permission (see area 10).

## 7. MIRROR MAZE TENT

A large tent with alternating red and yellow stripes stands with banners flapping in the breeze. A painted placard near the entrance says this is "Marcella's Magnificent Mirror Maze."

A **circus hand** (see page 5) stands next to the entrance to the maze and collects an entry fee of 1 sp during the day and 1 cursed coin at night.

**Encounter: Random Roamers.** Roll on the Circus Encounters Table on page 7 to determine who the characters encounter in this location.

### MIRROR MAZE

The tent is filled with a maze of 8-foot-tall, sturdy mirrors. In order to navigate their way through the maze, the characters must each succeed on four DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) checks. A character that fails a check by 5 or more faceplants into a mirror taking 1 bludgeoning damage. Breaking a mirror gives a +2 bonus to the next check, but the sound will cause a group of roaming monsters from the Circus Encounters table (see page 7) to be waiting outside the maze to kick the offenders out of the circus (daytime) or attack them (nighttime). After three failures, a character finds themselves back at the start of the mirror maze and must try again or leave through the entrance. A character that successfully makes their way out of the maze can roll a d20 on the Circus Prize table on page 7.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The mirrors reflect horrific versions of the characters at themselves. On a failed navigation check, one of the reflections strikes the character through the mirror, dealing 5 (2d4) bludgeoning damage to that character.

## 8. EXOTIC ANIMAL SHOW

A large dirt ring filled with colorful boxes and hoops sits surrounded by rows of benches. The smells and sounds of animals fill the air.

When not performing or training, Amalace and Rizimar Helenios are here cleaning up and doing maintenance in the daytime or forlornly roaming the area at night.

**Encounter: The Animal Tamers.** Amalace and Rizimar Helenios (see Animal Tamers, page 4) host animal performances in this ring when not performing in the Big Top (area 10). They host a different performance every hour that lasts approximately fifteen minutes. To determine which animal show is currently being hosted, roll a d8 and consult the Circus Animal table. A barker (see page 4) roams around the area to draw people in while a circus hand (see page 5) collects 5 cp during the day and 1 cursed coin at night to see each show. The tamers call on random characters to hold hoops or stand in place to be leaped over by the animals during the performances.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The undead animals ambush any characters or other members of the audience chosen to participate in the show. Amalace and Rizimar do not participate in any combat and flee to the Big Top (area 10) if attacked.

## CIRCUS ANIMALS TABLE

d8	Animal
1-2	1d3+1 tigers
3	1d2 elephants
4-5	1d3+1 bears
6	1 giant ape named Bob
7-8	1d3+1 griffons

## 9. FORTUNE TELLER TENT

A small tent with alternating blue and black stripes covered in shimmering silver-threaded runes sits next to a matching wagon. A painted sign standing next to the dark entrance says "Mistress Violca's Fortunes" and a strong smell of incense wafts past.

**Encounter: The Fortune Teller.** Violca Pike (see page 5) sits behind a heavy mahogany table draped with a purple cloth edged in gold rope. A deck of tarot cards and a small sign that says "1 silver for a reading" sits on the cloth next to a brass bowl filled with 2d8 sp. Violca does not speak unless a coin is paid and then only to the person who paid.

The fortune teller will give a tarot card reading to any character that pays and gives results according to an *augury* spell that covers the next 24 hours. Violca uses a *prestidigitation* spell to create the illusions of lights and sounds of spirits moving about the tent. Characters attempting to engage in conversation with her outside of the context of the reading are politely asked to leave.

**Cursed Changes at Night.** The sign on the table changes to state "1 gold for a reading" (accepting only cursed coins), and the reading is done through a casting of small animal bones but otherwise remains the same as during the day. Violca is open to discussing the true nature of the curse to characters that succeed on a DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check.

## 10. BIG TOP

In the center of the grounds is a massive tent with alternating stripes of lavender and plum. A harlequin in a matching outfit with a bell-tipped hat stands at the entrance selling tickets.

The area around the central tent is patrolled by a group of 2d6 **clowns** (see page 5) that make sure no one sneaks in. The cost of admission is 5 sp during the day and 2 cursed coins at night. The harlequin selling tickets points the characters in the direction of the carnival games if they need to earn more cursed coins. The harlequin is secretly a wingless **erinyes** spying on the circus's misery for the archfiend the cursed coins belonged to originally.



Once the characters enter the tent, read aloud the following:

Inside the Big Top is an ample open space with three colorful rings set on the ground. Seating runs along the inside edge of the massive tent and faces inwards. Standing in the center is a small figure dressed smartly in a red tuxedo and velvet top hat. He flourishes his hand as a spotlight from above shines down upon him. "Welcome one and all!" he cries as he bows with hat in hand, "to the Greatest Show in the World!"

The Ringmaster Julian Starkspell (see page 4) introduces each act as they are ready to perform. To determine which act is performing, roll a d6 and consult the Big Top Acts table. Each show is described below. The Big Top empties after three performances, and only then is Julian able to be approached (see *Confronting the Ringmaster* below) by the characters.

### GM NOTE

If the characters are searching the circus for missing people (see *Adventure Hooks*), they are brought out and used as props and "assistants" in the nighttime acts for the performers.

## ACROBATS

Six **Marvelous Manacorns** (see page 4) perform on the highwire and the trapeze. They will invite a character to join them on the highwire at night as part of their act. If the character refuses, they turn hostile towards the party. Otherwise, the character will need to make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw when brought up to the highwire and "dropped" by an acrobat, taking 14 (4d6)



## BIG TOP ACTS TABLE

d6	Performers
1-2	Acrobats
3	Animal Tamers
4-5	Knife Thrower
6	Clowns

bludgeoning damage and landing prone after falling 40 feet on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

### ANIMAL TAMERS

Amalace and Rizimar (see page 4) have a random set of animals (roll on the Circus Animal Table on page 11) performing by jumping through hoops of fire and other feats of agility. These animals are hostile at night and will terrorize the crowd, instigating the characters specifically. If the characters do not engage, the animals finish their performance and end their act without hostilities.

### KNIFE THROWER

Sarafina Wolmae (see page 5) shows off her skills by hitting apples with her throwing knives off the outstretched hands and heads of two **clowns** (see page 5). Her act culminates in using a volunteer tied to a rotating wheel where she barely misses them while throwing knives blindfolded. She picks a random character to be her volunteer at night and does not even try to miss. The character tied to the wheel is restrained and can take an action to attempt a DC 15 Strength check to break the bindings. Another character within 5 feet of the wheel can use their action to free the restrained character, ending the effect.

### CLOWNS

A dozen **clowns** ride around the ring on unicycles, tripping over each other and performing other slap-stick acts of mock violence and acrobatics. The clowns target the characters with water-squirting flowers and cream pies. At night, the troupe attempts to ambush the characters after surrounding them.

## CONFRONTING THE RINGMASTER

The Ringmaster Juliann Starkspell (see page 4) will only address the characters at night and after they “participate” in three separate acts. The gnome is impressed with the characters’ tenacity and tells the story of the circus’ curse as the other performers stand around the ring, silently watching the party speak with the ringmaster. He answers honestly any questions the party has regarding their purpose for visiting the circus (see Adventure Hooks).

**Encounter: The Main Event.** Julian Starkspell wants one thing only—to give the characters the remaining unspent coins in his possession for them to spend it on him. The catch is they must battle him and two undead **tigers** in exchange for what they seek. Only then will he

give them what they want and permit them to leave the circus unharmed.

**Treasure.** The *ringmaster's top hat* (see Appendix) can be looted from Julian if he is defeated.

## CONCLUSION

The circus of the damned will continue on its way from town to town no matter what the characters' decisions. The curse drives them onwards, and unless the characters help them find the missing coins scattered across the nation, the undead carnival will find more victims. Perhaps the characters take pity on the circus and help them seek out the remaining coins. Perhaps the archfiend takes notice of their interference and sends his minions to stop them. The circus' horror will never end unless the characters step in to help.

## ADVENTURE HOOK RESOLUTION

**Missing Villagers.** If the characters manage to rescue the missing villagers from Ashwood, the sheriff pays the promised reward. The rescued villagers are never quite the same and remain scarred from their experience for life.

## APPENDIX:

### MONSTERS & MAGIC ITEMS

This section includes the new magic item the Ringmaster's Top Hat and the stat block for the wereape new monster.



#### RINGMASTER'S TOP HAT

*Wondrous item (hat), very rare (requires attunement)*

This velvet-covered top hat is decorated with engraved gold buttons and adorned with colorful feathers. While wearing this top hat you gain a +2 bonus on Charisma saving throws and ability checks, and you gain advantage on any Performance checks. The top hat has 1d4+1 charges and it regains 1d3 expended charges daily at dawn. While attuned to the top hat, you can use a bonus action to spend 1 charge to cast one of the following spells without the need for material

components (save DC 15): *dancing lights, disguise self, mirror image, or thunderwave*. You can also use a bonus action to spend charges to use the following abilities:

**Barker (Costs 3 Charges).** Each creature within 30 feet of you that hears you must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw or become incapacitated for 1 minute as they stand enraptured by your words. If you wish, all creatures in the area that are not hostile toward you automatically succeed on the saving throw. A creature that fails the saving throw can repeat it at the end of each of its turn, ending the effect on itself on a success. A creature that succeeds on its saving throw is immune to the effect of this top hat for 24 hours.

**Fireworks (Costs 2 Charge).** Choose an unoccupied space you can see within 30 feet of you. A dazzling display of colored fireworks bursts from that point, and each creature within 10 feet of the space must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or become blinded until the end of their next turn.

## WEREAPE

*Medium humanoid (human, shapechanger), neutral good*

**Armor Class** 10 in humanoid form, 12 (natural armor) in giant ape and hybrid form

**Hit Points** 153 (18d8 + 72)

**Speed** 30 ft. (40 ft., climb 40 ft. in giant ape or hybrid form)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
19 (+4)	10 (+0)	18 (+4)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)

**Skills** Acrobatics +3, Perception +7

**Damage Immunities** bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical weapons that aren't silvered

**Senses** passive Perception 17

**Languages** Common (can't speak in ape form)

**Challenge** 5 (1,800 XP)

**Proficiency Bonus:** +3

**Shapechanger.** The wereape can use its action to polymorph into a Large ape-humanoid hybrid or into a Huge giant ape, or back into its true form, which is humanoid. Its statistics, other than its size and AC, are the same in each form. Any equipment it is wearing or carrying isn't transformed. It reverts to its true form if it dies.

**Keen Smell.** The wereape has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell.

### ACTIONS

**Multiattack.** In ape form, the wereape makes two fist attacks. In humanoid form, it makes two greatclub attacks. In hybrid form, it can attack like a ape or a humanoid.

**Bite (Giant Ape or Hybrid Form Only).** Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 15 (2d10 + 4) piercing damage. If the target is a humanoid, it must succeed on a DC 14 Constitution saving throw or be cursed with were ape lycanthropy.

**Fist (Giant Ape or Hybrid Form Only).** Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

**Greatclub (Humanoid or Hybrid Form Only).** Melee Weapon Attack: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 10 (1d12 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

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**CIRCUS**

**BORIS THE STRONGMAN**

**EXIT**

**CARNIVAL GAMES**

**THE MAZE  
OF  
MIRRORS**

**THE  
BIG TOP**

**EXOTIC  
ANIMAL  
SHOW**

**MAGNIFICANT  
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**VIOLCA THE SEER**

**ENTRANCE**