

CROSSROADS CARNIVAL

POWERED BY THE
* APOCALYPSE *



THE STRONGMAN



THE SNAKE CHARMER

* ONE
NIGHT
ONLY *

PLUS MUCH MORE!

PRESENTED BY
KATE BULLOCK

CROSSROADS CARNIVAL





CREDITS

Writing & Design by Kate Bullock

Developmental editing by Mark Diaz Truman

Additional development by Brendan Conway, Marissa Kelly,

& Sarah Doombringer

Copy editing by Justin Rogers

Proofing by Katherine Fackrell

Layout by Sarah Doombringer

All art procured through Creative Commons, Can Stock Photo /
macrovector, & Sarah Doombringer

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May the dice be ever in your favour!

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CHAPTER 0: INTRODUCTION

WELCOME TO THE CROSSROADS CARNIVAL

It was the Dirty 30s and the world was swallowed by black clouds of dust. Locusts and rabbits swarmed the land. Drought lingered, leaving arid throats and dirty people. People slaughtered snakes and hung them belly up, believing it would bring the rain. Snake oil salesmen were paid \$500 in depression-era money to bring the rain. The phrase “if it rains” became permanently etched on the lips of farmers. It was the end of times.

Dust storms came suddenly and hit hard. You couldn’t see more than three feet in front of you. The chaos could create enough static electricity to power cities. Cars and radios shorted from the charge. Blue flames licked off of barbed wire. People dragged chains behind them to help offset the electricity and touching someone could give enough of a shock to knock full grown men off their feet.

The people ate boiled weeds and a little wheat each day. They prayed for water. They prayed for salvation. They asked if this was a punishment. They asked if God had forsaken this land. They prayed. And they starved. And they thirsted. And they died.

The Promise of More

Those who didn’t die sought release where they could find it. Distraction was a precious commodity and the lights of the carnival offered a salve for the souls of the lost. Beneath the luminous bulbs, dreams were bought and sold for pennies. It was a night where the troubles of dust and hunger couldn’t touch them.

But they can’t quite see the truth. Where they see a woman in a tail costume, there lurks a mermaid grinning with sharp teeth. Where they see a cheat playing guessing games with cards, there sits a seer connected to the beyond. All they see is paint, sequins, sleight-of-hand, and a dazzling performance. They don’t see you, the monsters, as you truly are. They see what you are pretending to be.

As they gaze at your facade, you see beneath their masks. You can see the deaths of their children etched into the dusty wrinkles on their faces and the bloody price they paid to save their last son. You bear witness to the brown pneumonia held at bay with black magic. The darkness has them in its embrace as it claims Dustbowl America. You’ve seen just how far starvation can push a man.

The Promise of Pain

Somewhere along the line you began to call the carnival your home. Hate, fear, and loathing drove you to the outcast sanctuary. They offered you the facade of safety and a hint of hope in exchange for work - bloody work. If you could help drive the darkness back and save the soul of man, perhaps you could be more than a monster in the dark.

It was here you learned of the battle that was being waged for the souls of mankind. It was an ancient struggle you would find yourself a soldier in. You would seek it in the small, nearly abandoned towns, find it behind hidden visages and facades, then do all you could to stop it. The prayers of the rubes would be answered by you and others like you, supernatural sideshows dangerously close to losing your humanity. Here you have been given a chance to seek salvation, and that chance is the **CROSSROADS CARNIVAL**.

THE “ONE NIGHT ONLY” EDITION

This handy guide to the Carnival is all you need to begin playing **CROSSROADS CARNIVAL**. It isn't the final version of the game. It's a peep show before the curtain parts and the true horror begins. Carnivals need a good crew to get them off the ground. This is why you're needed more than ever. Enter and catch a glimpse.

If you have feedback about your experience, I'd love to hear it. Let me know what can be done to help improve the show, by sending an email to crossroads@magpiegames.com.

This game is *Powered by the Apocalypse*, meaning it uses the rules intrinsic to *Apocalypse World* by Vincent Baker. This incredible system has powered other games, such as *Urban Shadows*, *Monsterhearts*, and *Bluebeard's Bride*. Even if you find this particular show is not for you, I recommend you give any of these other games a spin; they are worth it!

Some familiarity with games *Powered by the Apocalypse* may well be necessary to run this game. Unfortunately, we don't have the space for detailed explanations of the *Apocalypse World* engine in this book. But if you are unfamiliar and brave, dive in regardless. There's something in the show for everyone.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

Fortunately, all you need to take a walk down the midway are this book, 3–5 players, your **Master of Ceremonies (MC)**, the printed **playbooks**, some six-sided dice, pencils and about 3–4 hours. Having this guide to your carnival experience nearby is certainly helpful as it contains information to help you have the best show possible, but isn't necessary. You are always welcome to wander in the dark alone.

CHAPTER 1: THE CARNIVAL

The Crossroads Carnival is a slightly shoddy, dusty as fuck, mysterious place of promise and fear owned by something ancient and unknowable but operated by an inhuman manager. It's made of tents, trucks, wagons, and the odd car. Upon opening, the carnival is alive with sounds and smells. Popcorn and candyfloss scent the air while bright lights struggle to illuminate the shadowy flaps of tents. Screams and laughter bubble up from the wandering rubes. Mechanical music and barker's sermons pull attention away from the games and the sweets. It's chaos.

But behind the carnival's painted face is the war that humanity can feel but not see. It's fought by the performers, supernatural creatures determined to forestall the apocalypse. The blight on the land has brought the locals to their knees, and in their desperation, they turn to the darkness for comfort, food, and safety. The performers rage against the darkness with wit, determination, and sacrifice.

THE CARNIVAL AT NIGHT

When darkness eats the sun and night enters the carnival, magic happens. To the rubes, mystery fills the air and slips over their skins, making them brave and nervous. They fill the carnival with their needs and expectations, and a touch of fear, too. To the occupants of the carnival, the true work and performance begin. It is full of opportunity, unstruck deals, and harsh lessons. In this world, it is also a battleground where souls and the fate of the world are wagered.

Every sort of human filters into their individual tents. The shows are always intimate and tempting: the strongman showing off his vicious strength or the snake charmer enticing men with her seductive dance. There's something alluring about the darkness within each show, an essential key to the brief moments that reveal how the darkness has corrupted the town.

THE CARNIVAL DURING THE DAY

When the sun breaks the sky open and pours light over the carnival, the magic withers and a strange mundanity sets in. The winnings from the night before are shared, bread is broken, and business is tended. It is during the day that the occupants of the carnival seek solace with one another and find comfort in a semblance of home. It is the time when police arrive if trouble visited and when ill- or well-intentioned citizens appear with questions or demands.

The sunlight means that the worst work must begin. Gas has to be bought, food procured, contacts met, and most importantly, the word of the carnival must be spread to town. The safety the carnival provides is left behind and the performers must enter the world of the townsfolk. A world of pain, anger, hate, and sometimes, pity. But never love.

THE RUBES

The townsfolk, or rubes, bring with them their varied problems and difficulties, demands and prejudices. They can be kind, as pity is an emotion that is not foreign to them. But their lives have made them hard, and sometimes eager to make deals with the worst of the darkness. The rubes are survivors, victims, and masters of their own destinies. They are the first to become bloodletting warlocks to save their families from starvation. They are sympathetic and cruel.

In town, the rubes are in control of their own landscape and see the performers as outsiders. They will eroticize them, wanting to touch and marvel at their freakishness. They will hate them, calling them every slur they know and lashing out with violence if they feel wronged, afraid, or threatened. They will act on insecurity and invasion with twisted and sudden rejection. They will refuse service. They will try to abuse, in every way, the performers who come to town.

THE DUSTBOWL

The carnival stands against the backdrop of Dustbowl America in the 1930's Great Depression. People are starving, broke, and afraid. An apocalypse is about to happen. There is massive unemployment, dead soil, drought, plagues of locusts, and brown pneumonia spreading everywhere and to everyone. The dust is everywhere.

Desperation is the guiding beat by which the people march. Their keening fear is felt in their glances. Grifters walk amongst them selling grace. No one is clean and no one is honest. Hysteria and mass migration sweep the landscape where faith once had roots. Despite this, churches barely see a rise in attendance. Instead, the desperate turn to something else, something forbidden and old they can't fathom and can barely speak to. The darkness greets them with open arms and provides relief from starvation, disease, and death at the steepest of prices.

THE END OF TIMES

Seeping out of the cracks of the world is the vicious battle between the benign and malignant forces of the world. Light and dark. Good and evil. The manifestation of that malignancy is the **darkness**, constantly threatening to swallow the world. If it is allowed to spread unchecked, the battle will be lost. It will birth the End of Times, an apocalypse flirting with the horizon.

Every portent of impending doom has been witnessed. There come no rains, the children starve, plagues of locusts arrive, the people whisper that God has abandoned them. Monstrous creatures slip out of the shadows with hunger in their eyes. Yet despite the panic and desperation, the people do not turn to God. Instead they whisper to the darkness, making deals and brokering promises to sustain themselves. And it obliges.

With each soul it tempts, opportunity is born. Those born of the darkness itself seek out the spreading corruption to starve it. A select few of the supernatural fight against the rising tide, trying to save their humanity and the mundane around them from the end of days. Walking on the path of righteousness, they must face the crossroads: redemption or destruction? Will they save the world from its own apocalypse or scour the darkness with noble fire? What price will they pay for salvation?

THE CHARACTERS

The sideshow performers of the Crossroads Carnival are different from those of almost any other carnival. They are not pretending to be creatures of fancy and myth, they *are* these things. The **Geek**'s hunger does not fade when the curtains close. The **Dog Faced** does not remove sharpened wolf teeth. The **Snake Charmer**'s serpent does not stop whispering. They are all touched by the darkness, belong to it, and yet strive against it.

As one of the last havens from the outside world and the scorn of humans, the performers find a home at the Crossroads Carnival. It is here they learn what it means to have family, love, and belonging. It is here they can nearly feel safe. Despite its sanctuary, they feel the constant calling of the darkness, tempting them with hungers. They feel the war against their skins and still fight for the side that would have them killed if they knew of their true natures.

The performers hold tight to humanity. They long to be seen and felt as a force of good. They want to make a difference. But they also long for the things all people want. They want to feel love and affection. They want to belong somewhere and be safe. They want a community. Sometimes, the lengths they go to get these things draws out their inner monsters, and the darkness may take hold of them.

Performing

Each sideshow performer has their own unique talents. These abilities and gifts are not begotten naturally. None of them are truly human. But their inhumanity allows them to interact with the world differently and put on a convincing show for the rubes. Because they can perform, it allows them a precariously safe space within the carnival. Their manager runs a tight ship and has an unsettling ability to know their darkest selves before they do.

Performing invites the eyes and opinions of outsiders, and is an inherently dangerous moment in a performer's nightly routine. Each act is unique and filled with its own mysteries to be glimpsed. While a performer may not perform in every session, there will be pressure on them to perform to earn their keep. They must ensure their performance is evocative and remember the audience is made up of those who would turn on them in the blink of an eye.

Fighting the Darkness

The darkness is responsible for it all: the dust, the drought, the starvation, the death. The impending doom of the darkness's rise leaves a wake of apocalyptic symptoms. The world is sick with an infectious cancer the performers know they must remove—while knowing it will spread to them the more they touch it.

Yet each troubled performer also struggles with their inner monster. Within them lies the potential for disaster, blood, and carnage. Whether they were born different or cursed or forced to be a monster, each of the performers carries the darkness as a burden. It's the reason they must hide and find refuge in a carnival. As the darkness begins to consume the world, the performers can feel it and the tug of fate to fight against it.

While they are trying to destroy the darkness, they are also adept at using it for their own means. The performers have the unique ability to become more than human and use the darkness within them to fight the war. The apocalypse that threatens to consume the world may never come if the battle can be won by the performers.

But the cost is steep. Many will become the very things they hate in the struggle.

Their carnival is as much a cage as it is a venus fly trap waiting to close on the darkness that enters it. The performers are the lures. Once the trap is set and the townsfolk enter, the performers seek out the darkness as they enact their shows. The darkness is clever, enduring, and dangerous. It will hide and come at the performers sideways, never head on. They defeat it with destruction or redemption, choosing subterfuge or carnage, through horrific violence or soul-eating bargains.

CHAPTER 2: CREATING CHARACTERS

Within the carnival, there are several sideshows you can masquerade as, each with a unique playbook that showcases their peculiar abilities. The performers are waiting to be given life. Decide which playbook you wish to play. What type of tale will you tell?

Each playbook provides choices you must make about your carnival performer, helping you shape who they are and what mark they leave on this world. You decide where they came from, who they are now, who they know, and how they survive night by night.

The playbooks available at the One Night Only show are the Dog Faced, the Geek, the Strongman, the Mermaid, the Snake Charmer, and the Seer. Each playbooks is only the first whispers of the story you are meant to tell. Breathe life into them and let your imagination run wild. Don't feel constrained by what is or isn't there. If there are details that you have discovered about your performer that are not mentioned on the playbook, don't fret. Each playbook is meant to be a skeleton onto which you put meat and skin.

NAME, LOOK, EYES, ORIGIN & INDULGENCE

Now that you have decided your playbook and path forward, begin by choosing which name we should hail you by. Each performer has a list of names pulled from various cultures, myths, and backgrounds. Do not feel limited by the names provided—if something arrives in your mind that was meant to be, use that instead.

Next choose an option from potential looks. How do you picture your sideshow performer, and what do the rubes see when they gaze upon them? Let this choice feed your imagination, and decide what the look means to you.

Next, select what best describes the eyes of your performer - the windows to their soul. In a world where souls are for sale and Ol' Scratch comes knocking for the favor you owe, the eyes can reveal truth. Decide what this description means to you, if their eyes were always such, and what their eyes communicate in a glance.

Then you make your most important decision: an origin, how your performer came to be unnatural, the beginning to their story. Were they born serpentine or were they bitten on a moon filled night? If you have a particular origin story in mind, weave it into one of the choices, or, by all means, wander off the beaten path and blaze your own trail. Decide what your selection means to the character's fiction and how it builds on the performer's story.

Finally, decide on your performer's indulgence. What do they crave that would be considered depraved or inhuman? This indulgence will be geared towards their monster within, something that the darkness can offer them and they will be hard pressed to turn away. Name their monster's cravings and write it on your playbook.

PITCH CARDS

A pitch card is a small biography that tells your story and who you are. On your performer's sheet is a series of questions for you to answer to help you discover more about them. The questions are a journey to discover how deep your rabbit hole goes. Take your time filling out and answering the questions posed to you about who you truly are. Answer them with vulnerability and honesty, and be sure to dig into the questions. Once you are finished, continue through the rest of the playbook and read the answers to others once everyone is done.

STATS

The performers each have four stats that help measure their qualities. The stats are **guile**, **grace**, **bones**, and **breath**. Whenever you **trigger a move** in CROSSROADS CARNIVAL, you roll two dice and add the appropriate stat. These stats demonstrate how well or poorly your performer is likely to do at any given task. As you gain **xp**, you will **advance** and be able to improve your stats.

- ★ **Guile** lets you see the world for what it truly is, glimpse its hidden meanings, and see the best way forward. It lets you make clever bargains and gain careful insight into uncomfortable situations.
- ★ **Grace** allows you to see others for who they truly are and interact with the mundane world. It allows you see the truth in others' eyes and give them comfort in a time of strife.
- ★ **Bones** lets you break others with unsettling violence, tear the physical asunder, and face the dire consequences for it. It allows you to hurt people and destroy the world around you.
- ★ **Breath** tells you how well you walk the line of humanity but still maintain the monster. It allows you to do incredible things and endure the shadows most will never notice.

All performers have a line of beginning stats. You may add +1 to any of these. It is wise to glance over the **basic moves** and **playbook moves** before assigning your stats or adding the +1. Look at what your playbook's moves require you to roll, what basic moves you want to be good at, and then apply your +1 to whichever stat seems the most useful.

PICKING MOVES

The performers all begin this story with two moves from their playbooks. Read over the moves available to you carefully before deciding. A move will signal to your **MC** what kind of story you want to tell as well as what kind of troubles you want your character to wander into. A Seer who chooses **The Cards** wants to ask invasive questions of others and discover the truth behind mysteries, whereas a Seer who chooses **Portents of Doom** will be seeking to make deals and prevent the future from happening.

Each move requires you to think about both how your performers behave as carnival sideshows and as the heroes seeking to stop the blight on the land. What do the Seer's cards look like? What kind of wolf does the Dog Faced turn into? The answers to these questions may come to you immediately when you select your moves, or you may wait until you use the move to describe what it looks like.

SIDESHOW ALLEY

Finally, you are ready to pull back the curtain and reveal your act to the world. Once everyone has completed their playbooks, take turns describing your characters. Let your fellow performers know your name, your look, what your eyes convey, and where you came from. Review and answer your **Pitch Card**, filling the other performers in on the information as you go. Feel free to tie your stories to one another. You are, after all, stuck in this hellhole together.

While your fellow performers are introducing themselves, listen carefully and ask questions about what excites and delights you. Be mindful not to interrupt the show, but help flesh out the carnival by asking questions and answering any questions put to you. Find your way to the **Sideshow Alley** and begin answering the questions there. Choose other performers, not NPCs, as the focus of these questions.

Bear in mind as you fill out the **Sideshow Alley** that you all live, perform, and fight in the same place. You must work together to save yourselves and the world around you. You may have differences, even anger and hate, but it cannot be so overwhelming that you would forgo the fight happening around you.

CHAPTER 3: PLAYING THE GAME

When we play roleplaying games, we have a conversation between the people at the table. We must listen, ask questions, and share our ideas. The story we are telling is most compelling when we work together to create something unique and alive.

During the conversation, you may hit a point of uncertainty where you need to find out what happens. When this happens, you trigger what is called a **move**. If you want to make a bargain with Tom-Tom the barker so he'll keep people out of your tent, then it's time to pick up the dice and roll to see if you can craft a deal to the liking of both parties.

Moves are only used to address risky actions, not ordinary things, such as walking through the midway or buying a candied apple. Each move has a trigger, a phrase that tells you explicitly what needs to occur for the move to happen. You can't just strike a deal because you want to, for example; you must offer up something precious.

Be prepared. Whenever a move is triggered and dice are rolled, it means the fiction is about to change, no matter the outcome.

Dice

When a move tells you to roll, roll two six-sided dice (2d6) and add the results. The moves often tell you to add a stat, such as **+guile** or **+bones**. Add the appointed stat to your rolled result to get your total.

Sarah has her character, Sandor the Strongman, **offer solace** to Ondine the Mermaid. She rolls 2d6, and gets a 7. She adds her grace (+1) for a total of 8. Sarah and the MC look to the move to see what happens next.

There are three possible outcomes when you roll the dice:

- ★ a 10+ is a **strong hit**
- ★ a 7 to 9 is a **weak hit**
- ★ a 6- is a **miss**

Naturally, you want to roll high. On a 10+, you get most of what you desire. On a 7-9, you get what you desire but there may be a catch, a higher cost, or a complication. On a 6-, the world turns against you; the MC will let you know what happens next.

Rather than roll dice, the MC responds to what the players do or say. They will narrate what happens and help describe how the fiction changes when a roll is made. If there is a disagreement on what a move means or how it works, the MC acts as a referee, particularly if one player is using a move against another player.

BASIC MOVES

Within the game, there are certain moves that all of the players can use. Those moves are called the **Basic Moves**. Take your time to read the moves and understand them so that you can recognize when they trigger during play. So that you may have a wonderful carnival experience, I've provided some additional notes on all of the basic moves below.

Offer Comfort

When you **offer comfort** to someone in need, roll +grace. On a hit, choose 2. On a 7-9, their player gets to ask 1 of you as well.

- ★ Who here frightens you?
- ★ How can I get you to _____ ?
- ★ What disgusts you about yourself/another/this place?
- ★ How can you be redeemed?
- ★ What do you desire from _____ ?

The carnival night gives you a moment to consider why Sandor the Strongman looks worried, but is always on guard. You suggest he sit and talk, and offer him a drink, the kind of comfort he needs. When you give a moment of pause in a storm, offering something that warms the heart and for a moment makes the world feel safe, you can truly see someone.

On a hit, you may ask two of the questions from the list. On a 7-9, the other player also gets to ask you a question from the list. All questions must be answered honestly. You cannot read someone truly if they have their guard up, but by giving them comfort, you may reveal more about yourself than you intended.

Keep An Eye Out For Trouble

When you **keep an eye out for trouble**, roll +guile. On a hit, take +1 forward on the answers you found. On a 10+, ask 2. On 7-9, ask 1.

- ★ What dark truth is hidden here?
- ★ What tragedy is about to happen?
- ★ What is my best way out of this mess?
- ★ Who here is stained by the darkness?

Tense moments happen within the confines of the carnival. Because the world is a dire place to the performers, it isn't uncommon for them to be on the lookout for what could hurt them, be it rubes, darkness or each other. Vigilance is key to surviving a world that wants to tear you apart.

The MC will answer your chosen questions honestly and give you the information without obfuscation. You can use the information to try to get what you want from the scene, to get out of the scene, to try to turn the tables. This move is a way for the performers to unravel what lies beneath a town's hungered visage. They can find the darkness, see who it has tainted, and also discover how best to survive it.

Strike a Deal

When you **strike a deal** by offering up something precious, roll +guile. On a hit, the deal is struck with a shake of hands. On a 7-9, you have to mark darkness or choose 1:

- ★ You pay more than you reckoned.
- ★ Someone else pays a price.
- ★ Blood will need to be spilled.
- ★ The darkness takes a cut.

When you strike a deal with another PC, they can mark darkness to weasel out of it later or mark xp when they finally follow through. Either way, you know the outcome.

The world revolves around making bargains and keeping your end of deals. When no one has money to bargain with, whatever you have that is precious will have to do. In order to **strike a deal**, you must offer up something you value, whether this is a soul, eternity, your own liver, or the key to your heart. Whatever it is, you would rather keep it. What you're getting in return should be just as precious.

On a hit, you strike the deal, shake hands, and now both parties are bound to keep their oaths. On a 7-9, you must mark darkness or choose one from the list as a consequence of your bargain, such as paying more than you thought you would, costing someone else, needing to pay in blood, or allowing the darkness itself to take something in the deal. These consequences may be felt quickly, but not always. Work with your MC to ensure the consequence you choose is appropriate and awful.

Endure the Darkness

When you **endure the darkness** in the face of danger, tell the MC what you want to withstand and roll +breath. On a hit, you do it. On a 10+, you also learn an unexpected truth about the situation. On a 7-9, the MC will offer you a wicked bargain, a painful choice, or a price paid to the darkness.

The darkness is supernatural and mundane all at once. It blankets the world in dust and horrors, the kind of things one must persevere through to continue on a chosen path. It would be easier to give in, but instead you choose to endure. When you endure, you are to abide it, to tolerate its presence and not lash out or try to control it. You cannot do more than let it wash over you and endure.

On a hit, you manage to withstand whatever comes your way. On a 10+, the MC will tell you something new and true about the situation. On a 7-9, there will be a wicked bargain, a painful choice, or a price the darkness demands. You may be asked to leave something valuable behind, to agree to a shady deal because it'll help you in the moment, or to let someone else suffer. But at least you endured the darkness, right?

Lash Out With Unsettling Violence

When you **lash out with unsettling violence** against someone, roll +bones. On a hit, exchange harm as established. On a 10+, choose one. On a 7-9, choose two.

- ★ You attract unwanted attention.
- ★ You take it further than you intended.
- ★ Someone precious to you pays for your rashness.
- ★ Mark darkness as the blood stains your hands.

Violence is a very dangerous and potent tool in the world. It is considered beneath the refined citizens of the world and always invites trouble. When you want to hurt someone physically, describe what it is about what you're doing that is absolutely unsettling. Violence is always alarming, but what about what you're doing makes it horrific and different, so much so that those watching would be disturbed?

On a hit, you hurt each other; mark harm as appropriate. On a 10+, you choose one option and on a 7-9 you choose two. You may choose to attract unwanted attention, such as having the carnival, the police, or the locals get involved. In your passion, you may take the violence further than you wished. An innocent may pay for your rashness, with their life, their freedom, or another price the MC finds valuable and suitable. Then again, you could just mark darkness to show how this violence has stained your soul.

Embrace the Darkness

When you **embrace the darkness**, mark darkness and roll +breath. On a 10+, choose two from the list.

On a 7-9, choose one:

- ★ Show someone true pain: rip the darkness from their soul (2 harm).
- ★ Show someone true fear: they must either run from you or freeze in place, your choice.
- ★ Show someone true disgust: extend your abilities to do something inhuman.
- ★ Show someone true grief: take something valuable from them.

There is inherent darkness in everyone. Those who are unnatural can feel it even more. It calls to them, tempting them to be a monster and abandon their humanity. Yet it also allows them to be powerful and to do inhuman things. When you embrace the darkness, you are utilizing the supernatural part of yourself to do wondrous things, but also welcoming the darkness into you and bringing yourself closer to ruin.

On a 10+ you choose two and on a 7-9 you choose one. For all of these, you mark darkness—that cannot be avoided. You may show them pain by hurting them more. You can scare them, causing them to panic or run away. You can do something inhuman, such as expressing a power or ability that a human wouldn't have. Or, if you wish to demonstrate grief to them by removing something of value from them, be it physical or otherwise.

Embracing the dark means caressing the darkest part of yourself, opening yourself up, and letting the evil in the world climb inside. It's just a little, but it's enough that you feel it beneath your skin, waiting to crawl out. Every time the darkness is summoned, it notices the carnival and those within. This move knocks on its door and asks it to come inside for tea, but it will leave in its own time, not yours.

YOUR INNER MONSTER

While the world sees the performers as human filth, the truth is they are inhuman monsters. Within each performer is the seed of darkness, their creator's lasting embrace that grants them powers beyond mortal ability. It is the constant struggle of each performer—how much they can give in to the darkness to save the world before they become the evil they fight. These inner monsters are the beasts that hunger, just as the darkness does, and when they arise Hell comes to town.

Their hungers are individual and unique. No two monsters will crave exactly the same thing. One forgotten god may hunger for supplication while another may crave witnessing death. These hungers define the monsters as much as they define the performers. When these hungers are indulged by the performer for their inner monster, it allows the performer to tap into that darkest power. A sated beast is a compliant beast.

As the performers move through the carnival, they encounter their enemy and calling, the darkness. Each has their own **darkness track**, a way to measure how much the darkness has impacted their souls. Should their track fill, their inner monster refuses to remain placated and silent. They take control. The player should read their **Monster Within** section aloud and follow it as closely as possible. It will also include how they release themselves from the monster, should they dare to try to regain control.

Once the performer has lost themselves to the monster within, they erase their darkness track. While they are their monster, they may still continue to use the basic moves and their playbook moves, which means they still mark darkness when told to. Should their darkness track fill while they are the monster within, the performer becomes a permanent monster and surrenders their character to the MC. Whenever this happens, all remaining performers mark a permanent point of darkness.

Indulge Your Inner Monster

When you **indulge your inner monster**, hold one. Mark darkness to spend your hold one for one to choose one from the list. Your hold disappears at the end of session.

- ★ Become invincible: ignore all harm from a single source.
- ★ Become omniscient: force another to reveal their hidden truth.
- ★ Become indomitable: turn a miss into a 10+ result.
- ★ Become undeniable: summon the darkness to face you.

The inner monster is so powerful, it can manipulate the world around it. This power comes with a cost. It gives the inner monster a deeper hold on the performer, pushing them closer to becoming a true monster. They may indulge their monster's drive and hungers and use the move above. The MC may ask how they indulge the monster within, and may ask for more if they do not feel it's enough to mark darkness.

While the lure of the darkness is incredibly tempting and can help a performer gain control of a horrible situation, it is also a precipice they walk upon. Moments of desperation may drive the performer to welcome the darkness and find a solution to their problems. It may also be the last time they can claim humanity if they are not careful. Be cautious you do not indulge too much or you will be lost forever.

SOLACE

One of the only ways that the carnival and its performers can survive the onslaught of corruption and malignancy is by finding solace in each other. While comfort is kind, solace is more. It relieves sadness, distress, loneliness, and disquiet. It's the moment of peace in the eye of a horrific storm. When the performers reach out for each other to hold to and help one another forget the direness of the world, they are finding solace in one another.

Each performer has their own solace move that allows them to remove darkness from themselves. When a moment arrives where the performers have forged an emotional and meaningful connection with each other, and helped one another find peace, solace moves are triggered. The player reads their solace move aloud and does as it says, as does their companion if they are a PC.

HARM AND HEALING

Pain is a part of life in the carnival. Whenever you take harm, mark off as many boxes as points of harm you take on your harm track. You can take up to five harm. On your sixth harm, you die. If this is your first time dying, Ol' Scratch will appear and offer you a dark deal in exchange for more time in this world. If you take the offer, you live. If you don't, you're dead. Make a new character.

Harm heals with rest and sometimes by supernatural means as the story demands. You may heal a point of harm for every long rest you take, such as a full night of sleep or an evening off from the show. The medical attentions of a rube or some sort of miracle worker are never free. But they are safer than tangling with the darkness half-dead.

ADVANCING

Whenever you roll a miss, fill in one of the boxes of the xp track. There are five spaces to mark xp. Once you've filled all five, you can advance. To advance, clear your xp track and then choose one from below:

- ★ Add +1 to any stat (max +3).
- ★ Take another move from your playbook.
- ★ Take a move from another playbook.

CHAPTER 4: THE PLAYBOOKS

There are six performers who will be on stage for One Night Only. They are listed below, along with what they excel at and what they are weak in. There may be more playbooks in future versions of the CROSSROADS CARNIVAL, but for now, these are the sideshows available to you.

LIST OF PLAYBOOKS

The Dog Faced

Have you ever dared to believe that the legendary wolf-man was true? Behold the horror and fangs of the Dog Faced, cursed forever while seeking a pack, family, and home.

High Stats: bones, breath

Low Stats: grace, guile

The Geek

Gaze at the depraved and degraded thing before you. Its hunger knows no bounds as it consumes the flesh of living creatures. Mind the stench around this feral, hopeless man.

High Stats: breath, guile

Low Stats: grace, bones

The Mermaid

Never before seen, the Mermaid calls to you from her tank. Do not get close, for they are beautiful yet deadly creatures who can call men to their deaths.

High Stats: grace, bones

Low Stats: breath, guile



The Seer

Want to peek into your future? Step right up and let the cards tell you a tale. True love? Children? A betrayal? Only the Seer can see your fate.

High Stats: guile, breath

Low Stats: grace, bones

The Snake Charmer

Let the original temptation enthrall you. Come inside and witness the unnatural sway of the snake dancer. Watch as they handle the serpent with tenderness, always escaping the venomous bite.

High Stats: grace, bones

Low Stats: breath, guile

The Strongman

Stronger than Hercules, this Strongman promises to show you terrifying feats of strength, durability, and might. Be amazed as he rivals Atlas himself, but beware his fearsome and uncontrollable rage.

High Stats: bones, guile

Low Stats: grace, breath

You can read the playbooks in full in Appendix 2: The Playbooks on page 35.



CHAPTER 5: THE MC

When you assume the mantle of Master of Ceremonies (MC), it is your responsibility to make the world of Dustbowl America feel real and alive and to make the battle for souls meaningful to the performers. This can be a difficult task; to help you, I have provided several tools. The agenda and principles will help guide you in making this world come to life, while moves will give you the tools to make the realism hit home.

If you haven't yet, I recommend reading the MC sections of *Urban Shadows* and *Apocalypse World* for guidance and advice. If this happens to be your first journey as the MC of a PbtA game...welcome, friend. We've longed to have you join us. Fret not, you will do more than well at the task before you.

PROBLEMATIC CONTENT

Depression-era America is a snake pit of problematic content. From sexism to racism to queerphobia and ableism, the 1930s weren't kind to anyone. On top of that, you play performers in a carnival, a place where the townfolks regularly treat the performers as less than human. While the game is playing with these themes, it is important to remember that everyone's safety and fun is important at the table.

I do not use slurs at my table. The only one I generally use in *CROSSROADS* is *freak*. You do not need to be authentic to the era to make the performers feel like they don't belong. Do not use the game as an excuse for invoking problematic and hateful language.

Before any game, I generally warn my players that this game contains the following: Abuse of all kinds (physical, emotional, and sexual), shaming, violence, animal abuse, and almost every kind of othering (being treated like you don't belong in society).

If any player wants to remove some of the content, do your best to work with them. The game is inherently about people outside of accepted culture, and while that can make people uncomfortable, it is a core concept of the game. It is important that everyone understands this and wants to play that story.

To keep the game safe, I always use an **X-Card**. The X-Card is a tool you can use to ensure everyone is having fun and feeling safe at the table. It can be any piece of paper or card with an X drawn on it. If at any time in the game someone is uncomfortable with the content, they can touch the X-Card. The content can be reworked, the game can fade to black, or they can take a break if needed. You can find out more about the X-Card by John Stavropoulos here: <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>

AGENDA

- ★ Make the darkness unrelenting.
- ★ Make the performers' lives compelling.
- ★ Play to find out what happens.

The **agenda** is here to help guide your decisions. As you run the game, these are the notes you should be hitting. If your game is doing all of these, then you are ensuring you and your players will have the best experience possible.

More than anything else, the world you portray around the characters should feel *real*. There should be consequences for their choices. The world should fear them, love them, hate them, and make them feel all of those things. Interacting with a rube should be tense, and the darkness should feel ever present. Deals struck must always be followed through, and promises made will have dire consequences if broken.

Make the darkness unrelenting

As much as the performers like to believe that they can find respite, the darkness permeates everything. It can be found in every rube, every carnie, and every performer. The darkness wants to consume and use the performers. It should be present in every scene, whether it's just a glimpse of something or just the pressure of knowing it's waiting, the darkness doesn't end just because of one victory. It shapes the lives of the performers and helps them become who they are meant to be. Even when the sun is the brightest, darkness still lingers in the shadows.

Make the performers' lives compelling

The life of a performer never has a dull moment. Whether they are being exploited by the townsfolk, harassed by the manager of the carnival, or being tempted by the darkness, their lives should never be boring. There may be brief moments to pause and collect their breaths, but these moments should be times for evocative vulnerability, not dullness. If their lives are boring, it's time for you as the MC to make it compelling and fascinating. This is a carnival. A boring show is a dead show.

Play to find out what happens

While the world of the carnival is about the machinations of the darkness, it is important that you as the MC focus the game on the performers and what they are doing. The story will follow the players as they play the performers, and because players will often do things that surprise you, you cannot predict or prepare for what will happen. The most wondrous story will arrive at the carnival when you are prepared to let go of your plots and simply chase the tale the performers are telling you.



PRINCIPLES

- ★ Cover the world in dust and poverty.
- ★ Address yourself to the performers, not the players.
- ★ Shroud your moves in shadow.
- ★ Treat them like freaks, but always offer a promise of more.
- ★ Name everyone; give them all hungers.
- ★ Ask compelling questions and build on the answers.
- ★ Be a fan of the players' characters.
- ★ Show them that darkness lingers.
- ★ Remind them everything rests on their shoulders.
- ★ Put them in their place.

These principles are designed to help you meet your agenda, to help you create and maintain the world the performers live in, and to drive the story ever forward. These are the guidelines for those moments when your players turn to you, looking for a push forward.

Cover the world in dust and poverty

The small towns and farmlands the performers encounter should feel like communities on the brink. The people within them should be desperate, hungry (not always for food), and eager for the change a carnival promises. While there is a clear line between the performers and rubes, no one should be able to escape the dust, not truly.

Address yourself to the performers, not the players

Use the name of the performers when you are addressing the players. This will help the players feel like they really are part of the carnival, rather than spectators observing. When you describe what is happening, speak to the character experiencing it. Tell them what they feel or hear or see or taste. This will allow the players to really sink their teeth into their characters while playing them in the game. Don't ever hold back in describing what they feel.

Shroud your moves in shadows

Whenever the players look to you to make a move, either because of a miss or a lull in the action, make sure you do so within the fiction and do not simply read a move aloud. The world you've created is rich with opportunities to fold your moves into the fiction naturally. When it is time for you to make a move, think of what the fiction demands and use one of your moves to continue the narrative that is happening in game.

Treat them like freaks, but always offer a promise of more

While the world sees the performers as unnatural and less than human, there are also those souls who will pity them or care for them. It is important that the people who aren't part of the carnival treat the performers like they don't belong, driving them out of society and back into the arms of the carnival. Yet this suffering is not constant. Sometimes the performers will find an ally where they least expect to find help.



Name everyone; give them all hungers

A witch may have just cause for her vengeance; a rube may have valid reasons for offering his son to the darkness. Make sure every one of your NPCs has a name and a hunger they cannot fully tame. That hunger may be for safety, food, shelter, sex, or money. They all have reasons. And those reasons make them real.

Ask compelling questions and build on the answers

Whenever there is a moment when you want to know more, or have a chance to dig deeper into what a player is saying or a performer is doing, ask compelling questions. Ask questions where the answers will matter. Ask questions there's no clean or clear answer to. Then use the answers to build the world around the performers and create what they are afraid of and want revenge against.

Be a fan of the players' characters

The world is full of suffering. People are starving and dying. But the performers are our heroes. They need moments of triumph, or else the shadow of the world will no longer be interesting, so much as constant and predictable. When you are a fan of the players' characters, you are giving them moments to rise above and succeed, moments to shine, and moments to do what they do best. Make risk and fear a real part of the world, but don't drown the characters in it. Let them have amazing moments as well.

Show them that darkness lingers

The carnival is known to the darkness and its agents; it has become a battleground. This war, though, is subtle and holds many lives in the balance. Townsfolk can feel the war but they dare not speak its name. The darkness should be omnipresent and know the moments to reveal itself to the performers, isolating them and punctuating their lives with its power and temptation. It is the only true constant.

Remind them everything rests on their shoulders

The way forward for the world can only be found and forged by the performers. Make everything they do impact the world around them. Really listen to what they tell you and rely on their input when making your moves or narrating the world around them. Let them make terrible decisions and follow through on their perfectly executed horrible plan. Everything they do matters—make sure they feel that.

Put them in their place

Everyone is poor and so everyone and everything they own is for sale. People are desperate and willing to do anything to survive, including selling their family members, themselves, and their belongings. The townsfolk may put a price on being entertained by the performers, such as wanting private shows or to fuck and feel the performers. Nothing is sacred in a land abandoned to the darkness. Always remember it isn't cheap to buy your dreams.



MC MOVES

Moves are how you, the MC, help create the living and dying world of the carnival. You can use moves to drive the fiction forward, respond to a missed roll, or add something when there's a pause in the story. Whenever there's a pause in the action and everyone looks towards you, it's time to use a move.

There are harder moves and softer moves. Softer moves are used to help set up potential future moves for the performers. Harder moves tend to be the result of missed rolls or from a set up with a softer move, and are harder because often what happens in a harder move is more impactful, giving the characters less opportunity to recover.

A softer move may be a threat that someone is about to get hurt, whereas a harder move may be that the person is hurt or dead. Harder moves require immediate action from the performers to stop things from getting worse or spiralling further. Both leave space for the performers to respond and react, but one changes the fiction more dramatically than the other.

When you are using your moves, be sure to describe the moves as opposed to just saying what the move is. Your moves are powerful and drive the fiction forward. Use them to add intensity and challenges to the performers' lives and to put them in situations where the outcomes are unclear and important.

- ★ Get the rubes involved.
- ★ Reveal the darkness within someone trusted.
- ★ Pit characters against one another.
- ★ Present help for the wrong reasons.
- ★ Offer a horrible bargain at the right moment.
- ★ Remind them that they will never belong.
- ★ Isolate, separate, or hurt them.
- ★ Turn a move back on them.

After you describe your move to the players, always ask "What do you do?"



TOWNS, RUBES, AND THE END OF TIMES

The performers' story centers around moving through the world by way of visiting small, isolated towns. These towns become the stage on which the battle of good and evil is fought, through acts of redemption and destruction. The MC should take time before each game to design the town the performers are visiting and lay the foundation the darkness has waiting for them.

When building your world, it's important to remember how desperate everyone is. The darkness is always on the edge of the horizon, waiting to climb into their hearts, homes, and faith. Each town has some part of it that has been corrupted, and at the core of that corruption are the townfolk who can be saved or destroyed in order to save the town's soul.

Towns

To create a town, think of an industry. Are they farmers? Miners? Most towns have a simple general store, a post office, a pharmacy, potentially one school or at least one or two teachers, a blacksmith, a whole lot of farmers and farmhands, and as always, a church.

Decide what the town needs. What is the town's hunger? People within the town will have made a deal or invited the darkness in to make that hunger end. It may be actual hunger, it may be power, it may be water, it may be peace. There will be a source of this corruption, such as a devil willing to deal, a witch wanting revenge, a fae holding folks under a glamour, or a warlock who has sewn magical seeds.

Once you have your hunger, your corruption, and your source of corruption, you must decide on the two ways the town can be saved:

- ★ The path of redemption is a nonviolent way to remove the stain on the town. They may make a deal with the demon or talk the witch out of her revenge.
- ★ The path of destruction is violent, involving kills, often brutally, the source of corruption. Destroying the corruptor will often leave the town destroyed, for they will have a need no longer fulfilled and no way of rectifying it.

However the performers decide, ensure that their decision carries weight and consequence, not just in the session, but in future sessions as well. They cannot destroy a town and continue their journey unaffected by the choice they have made; you must remind them again and again of their choice and its consequences.



NPCs

The people of the world are the true heart of the performers' journey. Ensure that the NPCs feel alive, vulnerable, and fierce, filled with a keening desperation that makes them just a little too hard.

- ★ Give every NPC a hunger, a motivating force that goes against at least one PC. When you play them, have them always working on fulfilling that need.
- ★ Put each NPC on an index card and write a few details about them on the card, including whom they've made bargains with, what they promised, and how they can be redeemed and destroyed.
- ★ Make sure the NPCs are tied to the PCs by various relationships. Ask provocative questions of the PCs when you introduce a new NPC and establish relationships with new NPCs before they've even hit the table.

The End of Times Track

The apocalypse is happening around the performers, moving towards a time when annihilation will come to town. As the performers save or abandon towns, the world is changed. With each show, there's a chance the apocalypse can come closer, and a moment where the performers can choose to destroy or redeem the town.

At the end of session, when a town has been destroyed or redeemed, the MC will mark their progress on the **End of Times track**, as well as along the **Path of Destruction** or the **Path of Redemption**.

The End of Times track allows the MC to pace the apocalypse and represent its coming. Beside the End of Times track are the Path of Redemption and the Path of Destruction. When a town is redeemed, mark one box on the Path of Redemption. When a town is destroyed or abandoned, mark one on the Path of Destruction.

Along these paths are Crossroads points. When you hit a Crossroads point on the Path of Destruction or the Path of Redemption, allow the players to choose one of the options from the list. If they choose an option that names a new player in the apocalypse, like a herald, prophet, or saviour, you're more than welcome to make that person one of the PCs, to invest them more deeply in the war. For every Crossroads point on the Paths that's met, mark one on the Apocalypse Track and let the MC choose one of the symptoms of the end to add to the fiction.

Once the fifth and final Crossroads point of the End of Times track is hit, it triggers a final showdown between the PCs and the agents of darkness. Depending on the choices made along the way, this can be an epic battle, a quiet meeting at a diner, or a game of chance in the midway. Let the fiction guide you.



LONG EXAMPLE

The Seer, Strongman, and Mermaid are gathered outside of the Mermaid's tent, watching the crowd that begins to enter the carnival. The manager has told them to keep an eye on the crowd after a local farm boy made a threat before the opening. As the performers watch, that same boy strides into the carnival, a little off compared to when they saw him before.

"Something is wrong," Mark says, playing Sophia the Seer. "I want to get a good look at this guy. I'm going to **keep an eye out for trouble.**"

"Great," Kate the MC says. "You can take a moment to see what's going on, but he's going to get closer to you while that is happening."

"That's cool. I roll with guile." Mark rolls and gets an 8. "Sweet. So I'm going to ask what tragedy is about to happen."

"The farmer is filled with some sort of rot. He is about to spread it to as many of these people as possible on his way to you and Ondine, as he's staring at both of you with sudden hunger," Kate answers.

"There's something wrong with him," Mark says to his companions. "We need to do something."

"Pull me into my tent. I'll lure him away from everyone, get him isolated. Can you watch the tent?" Marissa asks as Ondine the Mermaid.

"For you? Anything." Sarah answers as Sandor the Strongman. "I pull her into the tent in her tank, slowly, letting him see that she's getting dragged inside and then leave out the back."

Kate nods. "This guy comes slowly into your tent, Ondine, looking like candy has been dangled in front of him. He stinks like sweetness and has the look of festering corn on his skin. He grins when he sees you and takes a step towards you."

"I'm going to pretend I'm not afraid and smile real pretty at him. I want to distract him, so that Sandor and Sophia can sneak up behind him."

"I think you're **enduring the darkness.** Roll with breath."

Marissa rolls and gets a 5. "Great. What happens to me?"

"It totally works. You smile and he is fucking enthralled with you. His grin gets bigger and you see these rotting teeth with pustules on them. He lurches closer suddenly and grabs hold of you, grabbing at your hair and face. What do you do?"

"Yeah, no," Sarah says. "Am I close to him since Ondine distracted him?" Kate nods. "Good. I'm gonna grab this guy by the back of his neck and just fucking lift him up off the ground so he can't grab her and squeeze until he pops. Like, you're gonna hear cracking and snapping, nothing a normal man could do. I'm rolling to **lash out with unsettling violence**." Sarah rolls +bones and gets a 9. "Ugh. Okay. I'm going to choose. . . someone precious pays for my rashness, and I'll mark darknes."

"For sure. You totally pop his little head like a soda and this black mouldy dust flies everywhere. Ondine, you breathe that shit in and take two harm."

"So if this is going on inside the tent, I can see this since I'm by the door, right?" says Mark. "I want to try to figure out what this stuff is by using my sight. I'm going to **embrace the darkness**. The veins on my face seem to have dark ooze in them that fills my eyes until they're all black so I can see beyond." Mark rolls with breath and gets an 8. He marks darkness and chooses one. "I'm going to extend my abilities to do something inhuman. What do I see about this dust?"

"You touch the dust with your mind and can see that it's a rot, and you know someone put that disease in the dead man. Ondine has it now, and when you look at her you see her morph and twist. She becomes a black-haired woman radiating with the darkness, someone nearby. The woman opens her eyes...and sees you. You know she's coming for you. What do you do?"

"I look at Sandor and Ondine. 'There's a woman who's causing this disease. She's coming for u—for me. We need to stop her.'"

"Let her come. She won't be able to resist me if I speak to her," Ondine says. "I wait until these two step outside. Does the woman come to us?"

"Yeah, for sure. You can smell this kinda. . . rot, like when salmon are dying while they spawn as she gets nearer."

"Gross. When she walks by, I'm going to call to her."

"She glances inside and raises a brow but looks disinterested. There's something vaguely familiar about her, but you can't quite place it. What do you do?"

"Fuck it. I want her in here. I'm going to smile, open my mouth, and sing an alluring song to get her inside. That's **embrace the darkness**, right?" Marissa rolls with breath and gets a 10. She doesn't have to mark darkness. "I'm going to take something valuable from her, her free will, just for a second."

"So what does that look like?"

Marissa pauses. "Well, it sounds like far away music, kind of, like hearing something underwater. But it's ethereal and vaguely terrifying, like if you heard a woman singing alone in the woods at night. "



“Absolutely. It totally draws her in. As she draws closer, you realize why she’s familiar. She has a scar on the edge of her lip, just like your old lover who sold you to the carnival years ago. There’s this blackness in her veins. She looks sick.”

“Shit. Of course it’s her. I give her a sad smile. ‘My love! Where have you been all this time? I have missed you so much. Are you well? You look ill.’ When she comes close I’m going to grab her hand and squeeze it. I want her to know I’m worried about her. I’m going to **offer her comfort.**” Marissa rolls with grace, and gets a 4. “I cannot roll today.”

“You touch her and she pulls back from you, looking absolutely disgusted. ‘I thought you would have died by now after I sold you to this place. No matter. You will die soon enough.’ That weird dust seems to come off of her and you hear more coughing from outside. It’s spreading.”

“Wait!” Mark says as Sophia. “I rush back into the tent. ‘Please, stop. Please. Stop making these people sick.’”

“She laughs,” says Kate. “It looks like she doesn’t have much pity or kindness left in her.”

Sarah shakes her head. “I follow Sophia back in. ‘Enough, woman. What do you want? What can we give you to leave these people alone?’”

“The woman looks at you with hard, black stained eyes. ‘What could you possibly offer me? They ripped my heart out. Now theirs will rot.’

“I look at Ondine and wince slightly. “If you stop this sickness, I will give you my love for Ondine, my heart.”

“The woman stops laughing. She becomes very interested in you, as if you’ve laid out a fancy meal on a platter for her. Are you trying to **strike a deal?**”

“Yes. I’m offering up my only love in exchange for her stopping her gross taint.” Sarah rolls with guile and gets a 10. “Amazing. Finally.”

“For sure. You feel the love you had for Ondine wither when you touch her. All that you have left for her is possession and lust. The tenderness is gone. The witch’s darkness recedes and a kind of strange gentleness touches her face. She looks at Ondine and grimaces, tears slipping down her cheeks. You can see a kind of pure, unbridled love in her before she turns and flees, sobbing. What do you do?”



ABOUT THE PERFORMERS

Before the show begins and before your players choose a playbook, read the descriptions below about each of the sideshows. Which playbook they choose will tell you about the kind of game they want to be playing. Ensure that you give each sideshow moments to shine. Create NPCs and problems that are directly influenced by what the performers are about and what they can do.

The Dog Faced

The Dog Faced is loyal, dominant, and wild. They are about trying to balance ferocity and wildness with companionship. They are good at being the beast but also at protecting those they call pack mates.

The Geek

The Geek is morbid, seedy, and forgotten. They are about being the darkest version of mankind while struggling to be seen in the world. They are good at being unseen and getting what they want by being vile.

The Mermaid

The Mermaid is exotic, ethereal, and disturbing. They are about being trapped by their body and using others to get what they need. They are good at controlling the world around them and drawing others to them.

The Seer

The Seer is mysterious, damned, and intuitive. They are about seeing a horrid future and making sure those around them fulfill or avoid that deathly destiny. They are good at seeing the truth about others and finding a way forward.

The Snake Charmer

The Snake Charmer is erotic, intoxicating, and subtle. They are about being a sexual being who lures others into folly and uses wiles to get their way. They are good at tempting others and at becoming someone new when they have to.

The Strongman

The Strongman is powerful, fearsome, and possessive. They are about the struggle to be gentle when their inherent nature is to destroy everything around them. They are good at breaking bodies and using violence to get what they want.



THE FIRST SESSION

While opening night can be difficult, here are a few lessons learned from previous performances to help guide your way.

Before the Curtains Part

- ★ Pick and complete your playbooks.
- ★ Go around the table to meet your performers.
- ★ Design the carnival together.

Creating the Carnival

Together you will learn about the Crossroads Carnival. Inform your players they travel and live with a wandering carnival in depression-era America. Then ask them the following questions, or feel free to use your own.

- ★ Who is the manager of your carnival and what's unnatural about them?
- ★ Who in the carnival is the closest to succumbing to the darkness?
- ★ Which town did you visit last, and how did it go south?
- ★ What are you usually on the run from?
- ★ Who in the carnival is utterly human, and how do you keep them safe?
- ★ What is about to break down?
- ★ Which town is known to be forbidden to carnies and why?
- ★ Who doesn't belong in the carnival, and why do they stay?
- ★ Where is your tent, what color is it, and what do they call you on your poster?

Always ensure you ask provocative and leading questions so that you and the players may build on the answers and incorporate the information into the game. Ask them for details about their acts and performances and the spaces they live in as well as the spaces they perform in. Let them define your NPCs as to who are their friends and who are their enemies. Letting your performers fill in details about the carnival will let you know what they want to play with and also let them have control over parts of the story.

End Game

If you are featuring the carnival for only one performance, then your game will end when you solve the mystery of the town you are attempting to save. If you are playing the long game over multiple performances, mark the Paths of Redemption and Destruction respectively, as well as the End of Times track, until a final confrontation is triggered. The game will end when that attempt is a success or a failure.

When you reach the end, ask each performer about their final scene, a moment of reflection, doom, or salvation, and how they will never be the same.

APPENDIX 1: MEDIOGRAPHY

Television

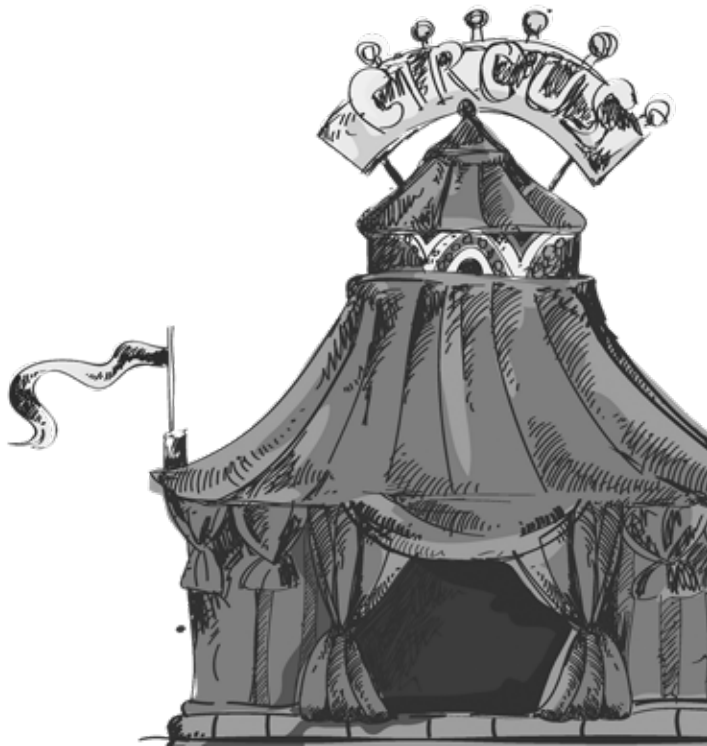
American Horror Story: Freak Show
Carnivale
Grimm
Penny Dreadful

Movies

The 7 Faces of Dr Lao
The Devil's Carnival
The Elephant Man
The Imaginarium of Dr Parnassus
Freaks
Mirrormask
Santa Sangre
There Will Be Blood

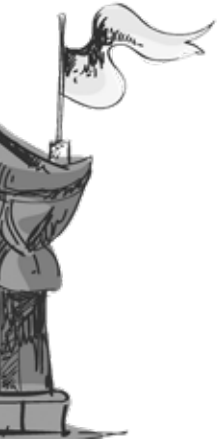
Literature

Alabaster: The Good, The Bad, and The Bird
The Circus of Dr Lao
Cirque du Freak
Fables
Frankenstein
The Night Circus
Something Wicked This Way Comes





APPENDIX 2: THE PLAYBOOKS





CHARACTER CREATION

Circle one from each

Name: Rusty, Tiffani, Pippa, Bart, Rory, Enzo, Wilder, Marquel, Dolores, Harriet

Look: mangy, groomed, grotesque, scruffy, devilish

Eyes: predatory, begging, gentle, soulful, playful

Origin: bitten by a beast, born under a full moon, spirit of the wolf, raised with the pack, man's best friend

Indulgence: _____

Beginning Stats (Add +1 to any of the following):

Bones +1, Breath +1, Grace -1, Guile -1

Pitch Card

- ★ How did you end up at the carnival?
- ★ Why are you fighting on the side of humanity?
- ★ Why don't you give in to your monstrous nature?
- ★ What do you chase even though it will be your death?
- ★ What does your transformation cost you each time you change?

Sideshow Alley

- ★ Who here do you hunt, crave, and want to taste more than anything in the world?
- ★ Who is part of your pack and how did they earn your loyalty?
- ★ Who threatens the safety of the carnival and how do you plan to stop them?

The Monster Within

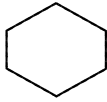
Your pack must be kept safe and those that cross that boundary must pay. You regain control when you feel safe within the embrace of a trusted friend.

Solace

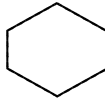
When you find solace in another, tell them what you find beautiful about them and ask them what they find beautiful about you. If you believe them, erase a mark of darkness. If you don't, tell them why they're wrong about you, and mark darkness.

STATS

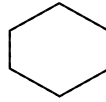
Bones



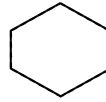
Breath



Grace



Guile



MOVES

You get **Beast Within** and choose one:

Beast Within

When you transform into a terrifying werewolf, roll +bones. On a 10+, choose two. On a 7 - 9, choose one:

- ★ Gain +1 to Bones until you change back
- ★ Do an extra harm when you **Lash Out With Unsettling Violence**
- ★ You can easily transform back
- ★ Heal all of your harm

On a miss, you are lost to your true nature. Upon recovering your human form, you discover that you did something you'll regret.



One of the Pack

When a loved one is in danger, add +1 when you **Lash Out with Unsettling Violence** to keep them safe.



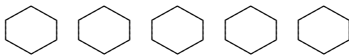
True Nature

When you tap into your wolf to sense the monstrosity in others, roll +breath. On a hit, ask two. On a 10+, take +1 forward to acting on the information you discover. On a 7 - 9, they get to ask one as well.

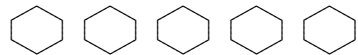
- ★ What is your secret weakness?
- ★ What kind of monster are you?
- ★ How could I tempt you?
- ★ Who quiets your hunger?

On a miss, their monster captivates yours. Mark darkness.

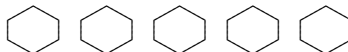
XP



DARKNESS



HARM





CHARACTER CREATION

Circle one from each

Name: Katherine, Homer, Dylan, Noir, Norman, Ozymandias, Myrtle, Marvel, Adrienne, Otaku

Look: damaged, barbaric, hollow, haunted, corpulent

Eyes: penetrating, wistful, pained, empty, obsessed

Origin: walking shadow, nightmare given flesh, forgotten god, fallen angel, neglected devil

Indulgence: _____

Beginning Stats (Add +1 to any of the following):

Bones -1, Breath +1, Grace -1, Guile +1

Pitch Card

- ★ How did you end up at the carnival?
- ★ Why are you fighting on the side of humanity?
- ★ Why don't you give in to your monstrous nature?
- ★ What comfort do you seek in drink and other debauchery?
- ★ What promise do you always make and never keep?

Sideshow Alley

- ★ Who supplies you with your choice of sustenance and how do you pay them?
- ★ Who have you seen at their worst and how did you comfort them?
- ★ Who did you see at their best and how did you tear them down?

The Monster Within

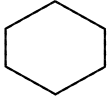
You shout to the skies all the hoarded secrets that will hurt the most people. You regain control when you feel you are someone instead of no one.

Solace

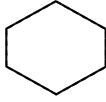
When you find solace in another, tell them how they give you light in the darkness and ask them what gives them hope. If it gives you hope as well, clear a point of darkness. If it doesn't, mark darkness and lash out: at them, at your friends, or at the world—whatever denies you hope.

STATS

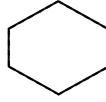
Bones



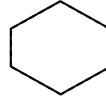
Breath



Grace



Guile



MOVES

You start with **Headless Beasts** and choose 1:

Headless Beasts

When you make a show of beheading living creatures for dinner in front of someone, roll +breath. On a hit, choose one below. On a 7 - 9, they also mark darkness.

- ★ They give you something valuable
- ★ They tell you something immediately useful
- ★ They promise you one favor, given now or later

On a miss: You disgust, frighten, or disquiet them into physical or verbal action against you. Prepare for pain.



Hidden in the Hills

No matter the place or the time, you know of somewhere safe. Add the following option to the list when you **embrace the darkness**:

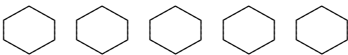
- ★ escape to safety



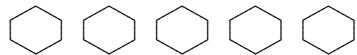
Shameless

When you hide from your betters in plain sight, roll +guile. On a hit, you remain unnoticed, quietly observing. Ask the MC one revealing question about the scene you observe; pressing any further will reveal your presence. On a 10+, you may ask a follow up question about the scene or the people in it. On a miss, you are discovered at the worst possible moment.

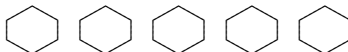
XP



DARKNESS



HARM





CHARACTER CREATION

Circle one from each

Name: Coral, Ondine, Neriss, Mishell, Lorelei, Araxie, Mazu, Thetis, Dani, Tristan

Look: ethereal, pearlescent, rotting, predatory, starving

Eyes: nervous, brooding, aloof, distracted, whelmed

Origin: followed true love, seeking revenge, banished from the sea, forgotten purpose, captured by lies

Indulgence: _____

Beginning Stats (Add +1 to any of the following):

Bones +1, Breath -1, Grace +1, Guile -1

Pitch Card

- ★ How did you end up at the carnival?
- ★ Why are you fighting on the side of humanity?
- ★ Why don't you give in to your monstrous nature?
- ★ How do you navigate land with no legs?
- ★ What did treasure did you bring with you from the ocean?

Sideshow Alley

- ★ Who helps you get around on land more than anyone else?
- ★ Who are you in love with? What about them draws you in, and what disgusts you?
- ★ Whose eyes can you feel linger on you too long and why don't you stop them?

The Monster Within

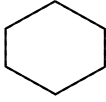
You destroy anything in the way of what you believe will make you truly happy. You regain control when you feel loved for who you are.

Solace

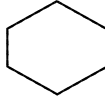
When you find solace in another, tell them a story of who you were before you came to land and ask who they were before the carnival. If they tell you a story in return, clear a point of darkness. If they don't, tell them what kind of horrible monster you think they were and mark darkness.

STATS

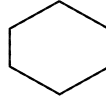
Bones



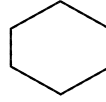
Breath



Grace



Guile



MOVES

You start with **Siren Song** and choose 1:

Siren Song

When you use your lovely voice as a weapon, roll +grace. On a hit, choose one:

- ★ Shriek until their ears bleed: deal 2 harm
- ★ Mesmerize even the hardest heart: an PC takes -2 on their next roll
- ★ Slip under their skin: dictate an NPC's physical actions for a short time

On a 7 - 9, also choose one:

- ★ leave yourself exposed to danger
- ★ drive a NPC mad with need for you
- ★ endanger someone you care for

On a miss, a terrible thing is called by your song and wants something only you can give.



Beauty from Below

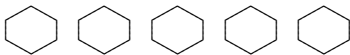
When revealing your aquatic features, you may roll +grace instead of guile to **Strike a Deal**.



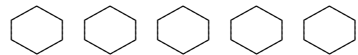
Soulless Beast

When someone offers you comfort, you may either always ask them a question of your choice in return, or simply lie to them and mark darkness.

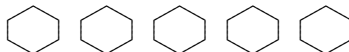
XP



DARKNESS



HARM





CHARACTER CREATION

Circle one from each

Name: Valeska, Pama, Alexander, Zoltar, Cato, Orion, Murdoch, Sofia, Airlia, Keller

Look: mystic, haunted, dangerous, disheveled, nomadic

Eyes: ancient, faded, laughing, piercing, someone else's

Origin: chosen by spirits, descendant of Sibyl, family trade, an ancient ritual, an unwanted and irrevocable curse

Indulgence: _____

Beginning Stats (Add +1 to any of the following):

Bones -1, Breath +1, Grace -1, Guile +1

Pitch Card

- ★ How did you end up at the carnival?
- ★ Why are you fighting on the side of humanity?
- ★ Why don't you give in to your monstrous nature?
- ★ What sinister destiny is coming to claim you?
- ★ What lingering spirit haunts you and why?

Sideshow Alley

- ★ Whose future are you always trying to keep one step ahead of and why don't you tell them?
- ★ Who comforts you when the darkness of your visions leaves you fearful and sleepless?
- ★ Who has a malicious spirit following them and why are you helping the spirit?

The Monster Within

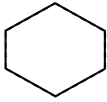
You must fulfill the visions that come to you, regardless of who they hurt. You release your inner monster when you see how your visions help save someone.

Solace

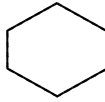
When you find solace in another, tell them how they make you feel truly seen and ask if they believe you know who they truly are. If they believe, clear a point of darkness. If you they don't, tell them their grim future, true or not, and mark darkness.

STATS

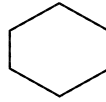
Bones



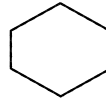
Breath



Grace



Guile



MOVES

You start with **The Cards** and choose 1:

The Cards

When you read the cards to see past the veil of time, roll +guile. On a hit, you can ask three questions of the MC about the past, present, or future; they will answer honestly. On a 7 - 9, the truth you see shakes you; mark darkness. On a miss, the cards reveal an immediate danger that is impossible to avoid.



The Touch

When you try to feel the truth inside someone, touch them and roll +breath. On a 10+, ask 2. On a 7 - 9, ask 1.

- ★ What are you afraid I'll see?
- ★ What secret do you know about _____?
- ★ What are you thinking right now?
- ★ What would you protect at all costs?
- ★ How do you truly feel about _____?

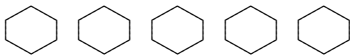
On a miss, you see the darkest of their futures and take -1 ongoing to prevent it.



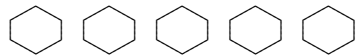
Portents of Doom

Whenever you **strike a deal**, you may mark darkness to foresee how this might end poorly and remove one consequence.

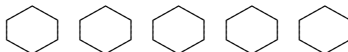
XP



DARKNESS



HARM





CHARACTER CREATION

Circle one from each

Name: Nula, Beatrix, Zelick, Korianna, Kou-Bao, Tamsin, Pavel, Tanith, Draco, Phineas

Look: exotic, modest, mysterious, ravishing, provoking

Eyes: dangerous, alluring, mocking, serpentine, teasing

Origin: ancient bloodline of sorcerers, half gorgon, daughter of Lamia, sacrificial offering, child of a basilisk

Indulgence: _____

Beginning Stats (Add +1 to any of the following):

Bones +1, Breath -1, Grace +1, Guile -1

Pitch Card

- ★ How did you end up at the carnival?
- ★ Why are you fighting on the side of humanity?
- ★ Why don't you give in to your monstrous nature?
- ★ What makes your cold blood run hot, no matter how much you resist?
- ★ What or who has your snake killed that you're keeping hidden?

Sideshow Alley

- ★ Who acts as though they own you and how do you show them they don't?
- ★ Who tastes like fear and how do you frighten them deliberately?
- ★ Who do you turn to when you need to feel loved and how do you pay them?

The Monster Within

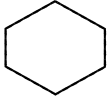
You must follow your base animal instincts and feed them until they are sated. You regain control when you fulfill the deepest needs of another.

Solace

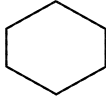
When you find solace in another, tell them how they've earned your trust and ask if they trust you in return. If they trust you, clear a point of darkness. If they don't, tell them a painful truth about themselves and mark darkness.

STATS

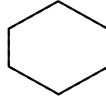
Bones



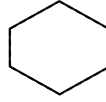
Breath



Grace



Guile



MOVES

You start with **Forbidden Fruit** and choose 1:

Forbidden Fruit

When you dance sensually with your snake for an NPC, tell them what you want from them and roll +grace. On a 10+, they'll do it for just a glimpse of your flesh. On a 7 - 9, they're going to want more than a glimpse.

On a miss: they'll take what they want from you, with violence if needed.



Viper's Kiss

When you deliberately poison someone with a kiss, roll +breath. On a hit, they take 3 harm, become paralyzed, or take -1 ongoing until the poison leaves their system, your choice. On a 10+, choose two options.

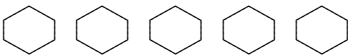
On a miss, you infect them with your venom, turning them into a monster like you.



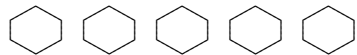
Shedding Skin

When you **Embrace the Darkness**, you may add "shed your skin" to the list of options. You shed your skin, allowing you to change your appearance slightly. If you would change your entire appearance to something completely new, mark an extra darkness and be born anew.

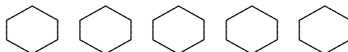
XP



DARKNESS



HARM





CHARACTER CREATION

Circle one from each

Name: Atlas, Janne, Sebastian, Mila, Svend, Sandor, Chyna, Kasia, Vladimir, Aneta

Look: god-like, imposing, despairing, desolate, ruined

Eyes: painful, judged, appraising, distant, dominant

Origin: failed experiment, demigod, last of a giant race, cursed by a bitter rival, in service of an infernal master

Indulgence: _____

Beginning Stats (Add +1 to any of the following):

Bones +1, Breath -1, Grace -1, Guile +1

Pitch Card

- ★ How did you end up at the carnival?
- ★ Why are you fighting on the side of humanity?
- ★ Why don't you give in to your monstrous nature?
- ★ What about your strength frightens you?
- ★ Whose innocence did you destroy in your anger?

Sideshow Alley

- ★ Who do you view as yours and how do you show them?
- ★ Who did you last put in their place and how bad was the damage?
- ★ Who is a friend you believe would never betray you?

The Monster Within

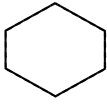
You release your built up rage on anything and everything, destruction your only salve. You regain control when you feel the power of gentleness.

Solace

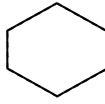
When you find solace in another, tell them something you're afraid of and ask them what their weakness is. If they share their weakness, clear a point of darkness. If they don't, frighten them into submission and mark darkness.

STATS

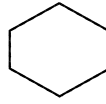
Bones



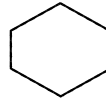
Breath



Grace



Guile



MOVES

You start with **Strength of 10 Men** and choose 1:

Strength of 10 Men

When you threaten to bring the pain in order to get what you want from someone, tell them what you want and roll +bones. On a hit, they can choose to:

- ★ stand up to you but take three harm
- ★ give in and do what you want

On a 7-9, they can also choose:

- ★ You mark darkness
- ★ You make a worse mess of things

On a miss, you can't bring yourself to follow through and expose an emotional weakness to your would-be victim.



Unflinching

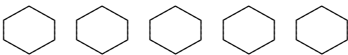
When you endure the darkness by suffering in stoic silence, roll +bones instead of +breath. On a miss, bones break instead of giving you strength; you take 2 harm.



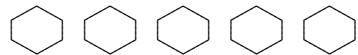
Man of Action

When you charge into trouble without thinking the situation through, deal +1 harm whenever you deal harm.

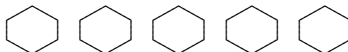
XP



DARKNESS



HARM





Hunger is everywhere in the 1930s Great Depression. The souls of humanity grow weak as they starve. And you are the only hope for a world about to be consumed by darkness.

Beneath the midway lights of the **CROSSROADS CARNIVAL**, you and your fellow performers are drawn into a battle between light and dark. You wander from one desperate town to the next, struggling to keep your humanity and save the souls of the rubes. But the cost is high, and personal deals with the darkness itself may be the only way to save others.

CROSSROADS CARNIVAL is a Powered by the Apocalypse game of outcast souls striving to save a world that hates and fears them.



Players	Time	Rating
3-5	3-4 hrs	18+



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POWERED BY THE
APOCALYPSE