

# THE CIRQUE

THE CIRQUE SUPPLEMENT FOR THE ELDRITCH LIVE ACTION ROLEPLAYING GAME

The ELDRITCH Live Action Roleplaying game is a lovingly crafted work of fiction created by John Kozar, Faye Ferguson, and Spencer McGhin, with additional input from, and content created by Megan Durham, Jessica Sills, Thomas Marshbanks, Galen Hall, and Joe Meyer. Special thanks to Lehanna Allen, Carl Holzbog, and anyone else who ever listened to us prattle on about the project. Thanks to everyone who helped to make this strange dream a reality.

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# THE CIRQUE



## WELCOME TO ARNESSE...

Eight great houses vie for control amidst a world in ruin after centuries of conflict and war. Ancient institutions scheme amongst the rulership of the land for their own small piece of the empire. This is the world of Eldritch. With this guide, you hold the key the gates of a world rife with bitter conflict, political turmoil, and mysteries both arcane and unseen. Ancient alliances are broken as quickly as they are forged. Lines are blurred between ally and enemy. Heroes are found in the most unlikely of places. The world is awakening anew. Where will you find your place in this forgotten dream?

## USING THIS GUIDE

The player supplements for Eldritch are intended to provide detail information beyond that which is known to the general player population. All information in this guide is to be taken as in-play information, known by you and others in your corresponding faction. You may over the course of Eldritch events discover new information that corresponds to your faction, however you will be able to share this information as you wish.

## HISTORY

The following section details that common historical information known to the members of the faction. While there is certainly more history to the faction, it will need to be discovered via the proper in-game channels.

The Cirque is the name for the crafting and merchant guild in Arnesse. They were granted an absolute monopoly over all crafting and trade by the monarchy early in the Age of Kings and have used this monopoly to make themselves one of its wealthiest and most powerful organizations. The Cirque is powerful, but in practice they act more like a consortium than a single, unified guild. The origins of the Cirque is found in its many separate merchant and craft guilds who banned together for physical and financial protection from nobles in the days following the Great War. As the Cirque grew, the separate guilds ceased to exist as independent entities and were replaced by a number of factions which developed within the main guild itself. Calling themselves troupes, each staked their claim over territories in major trade hubs wherein they established large guildhalls. In time, the strongest of these troupes dominated their respective region and began to enforce the Cirque's monopoly for both the benefit of the organization and their own.

Two powerful forces have been instrumental to the rise Cirque since its formation. The first are the nobility of Arnesse and their game of diplomacy. The Cirque has maintained a strict non-interference policy concerning politics and noble houses. For this reason, the guild has prohibited those of noble blood from joining their ranks; simply said, they don't want the risks or entanglements that come with their lineage. In addition, the Cirque are keenly aware of the fact that many nobles want merchants and craftsmen to work for them so that they might leverage their status and influence to reap the benefits at a fraction of the cost. As a compromise to what otherwise might result in a trade war, the Cirque invented the concept of Privilege. Much like a tax, Privilege is coin paid to the Cirque in a fixed amount by any crafter or merchant in their sphere of influence in specific intervals. This allows the Cirque to work for a noble on retainer, acquire something for them, or craft an item at their request, but still ensure the Cirque guild gets paid for the individual's efforts with a minimal amount of haggling, bookkeeping, or worse.

The second powerful force is that of illegal or illicit goods. There have always been goods or services that have been outlawed in Arnesse just like there have been those willing to pay those to acquire them. The Cirque has been in a unique position to procure said goods but did not want to do so under the pretenses of their existing monopoly for fear that any obvious connection could invalidate it. Out of this need the Menagerie was born. It nearly became an autonomous organization, with whole different leaders and different troupes, referred to as menageries. The only point at which the two converged was the vast guildhall in the Free City of

Orn to whom they both paid Privilege. The menageries are vastly different from the troupes given their status as powerful gangs who run the underworld and Black Markets of Arnesse. They do not heed a word of the King's Laws unless it suits their needs. They cultivate arrangements with the wealthy and powerful such that they might look the other way when extortion or other extreme methods are required. While slavery is outlawed in Arnesse, the Menagerie hosts a thriving trade in human flesh for those discerning markets that wish to acquire it. They are indeed the dreadmongers of the kingdom, even performing the grim task of collecting Privilege from those craftsmen and traders unwilling to pay.

Over the ages, the Cirque has moved further and further away from the concept of a true guild of artisans and merchants, resembling something more akin to territorial gangs who oversee merchant, trade, and underworld operations. The Cirque has rightly figured out that organizations who cannot defend themselves or are unable to project power and influence, will always be victims of the wealthy and the nobility. The Cirque has built itself around three primary pillars: 1) the ceaseless acquisition of wealth 2) the ability to project power both financially and militarily 3) to construct a decentralized power structure that is hard to confront by traditional means. The last point has enabled the Cirque to avoid even the most determined noble who has sought to undo their operations. The Cirque is one of the largest guilds in Arnesse with major guildhalls in ten cities and minor ones in at least a dozen others. It is almost exclusively populated by commonfolk, making it one of the best ways for those of low birth to acquire position, status, and wealth. The Cirque itself is a duality; it does not have many enemies and while it has no true friends, the wealthy and powerful line up to become allies. But the winds of change are in the air. As the Aurorym faith rises, tolerance for the immoral and uncivil behaviors often exhibited by members of the Cirque has reached an all-time low. While posing no immediate threat, the passing of the morality laws by King Giles II three years ago has many within the Cirque concerned that they may either have to change the way they do business or find a way to stem the general rise in social justice and moral turpitude that has risen in the Kingdom.

## BEFORE THE GREAT WAR

In the earliest days of Arnesse, long before the Great War, crafting and trading was done in a very informal way. The myths of old speak of legendary crafters who worked with fantastic materials to make items of incredible workmanship and power. Today, there are only stories and a precious few

legacy artifacts from that time; the stuff of dreams that the craftsmen of the Age of Kings long to reproduce.

As the ages wore on and governments became established, it quickly became clear that without the backing of a powerful social figure or noble, crafters and merchants would quickly be pressured or manipulated to sell their goods for less, labor under unfair conditions, or not work for certain causes. Thus, the crafting and merchant guilds arose, with each discipline forming its own organization. At one time there were dozens of them, with everything from blacksmithing to the guilds representing the more niche crafts of the cobblers and furriers.

While this system worked well and the guilds were largely respected for what they represented, they were still very disparate. It did not bode well that their sole form of protection was also controlled by those who sought to gain the most from its undoing. Guilds were also prohibited from taking substantial steps to protect themselves from the predations of the nobility. While they may have been largely successful in their respective trades, those who defied the often unjust wiles of the nobility were sometimes persecuted or worse.

## THE GREAT WAR - 451 A.S. - 760 A.S.

The state of the guilds persisted until the early days of the Great War. The events leading up to the conflict began in 440 A.S. with an explosion that rocked the Magistrat Council; the esteemed body of nobles who governed Arnesse. With the legislative body nearly destroyed, many of the agreements and arrangements put into place within the realm started to unravel, placing those who built their livelihoods around the trade and craft monopolies in a precarious position. Most who plied their trade as a merchant or crafter could only stand idly by as the Prime Consul of the Magistrat, Edric Bannon decried religious factions as the cause of all this civil unrest and declared war on the very Gods of Arnesse. But as they say, "war is good for business" and never were the guilds busier than in the next decade of nearly unending conflict. Sadly, no few artisans were pressed into mandatory service by the noble war machine; those who resisted were often accused of being religious sympathizers themselves and locked up. So too were many of the marvelous techniques of the age lost.

With the death of the last deity in 442, Edric Bannon sought to change the political dynamic of the land and declare himself King of Arnesse. All of the guilds were uncertain what that meant for the future of their organizations. Edric's reign is cut radically short by an assassin's blade but his

daughter, Lady Catherine Bannon takes the throne in his stead. Seeking revenge for the death of her father, Queen Catherine plunged the realm into war for the next eight years, turning house against house until only four great powers remain by the war's end in 451.

The single greatest impact of the Great War on the guilds was an event known as the Eldritch Cataclysm. Near the war's end, for reasons that even the wisest scholars have not uncovered, the magic that once gave the world life and meaning, simply disappeared and ceased to function. Overnight a craftsman's life changed entirely. Whole guilds were built around the use of magic or the creation of magical artifacts. Most of them were disbanded or faded into obscurity. Many gave up on crafting altogether and for the next fifty years the land was plunged into a great Dark Age.

### THE AGE OF KINGS - 451 A.S. - 760 A.S.

Scholars have tried to speculate at the amount of knowledge and lore that was lost in the ten years following the Great War. Known by some as the Time of Ashes, it would culminate in 455 when Queen Catherine Bannon orders the Great Library of Pharos burned. It was said that on that day "...the first 10,000 years of history were destroyed in a single fire." In the fallout from that terrible conflict, the land was ravaged by war, revolt, and chaos as those who reviled the Gods tried to stamp out the last vestiges of faith, and the newly born monarchy sought to gain control of its rebellious vassals. The remaining guilds came under siege and many of them were disbanded or destroyed entirely. For years, artisans were either forced to discontinue their work or go underground to continue their practices. Most of the art, finery, and artifacts of the old world were utterly annihilated and the secrets of their craftsmanship were taken to the grave by those who kept them. It was into this chaotic and violent landscape that the organization known as the Cirque would be born and from the most unlikely of places.

The Cirque has its origins in a performance troupe that became popular in the first century of the Age of Kings. Legends tell that the performers of the Cirque le Soir were among the finest in all the land. As they travelled from town to town and village to village, massive crowds would flock to their performances. This made the owners of the Cirque le Soir very wealthy. Those few local merchants and artisans who remained quickly learned that those who followed or attended the Cirque's shows would never want for crowds to purchase their wares. The Cirque started to take notice, collecting a small cut of those merchant's profits in what

would become the first sort of privilege. As this was a time of conflict and incredible danger, the owners of the Cirque often hired and paid for thugs and mercenaries to help defend them. When the Cirque grew wealthier, they could afford to extend that protection to those merchants and artisans who paid them tribute. In this brutal age without the protection of noble or knight, many were eager to pay the coin.

As the first century of the Age of Kings came to a head, more and more of the old guilds fell to obscurity and their numbers sought refuge and membership with the Cirque. The Cirque grew in power and as it did, it slowly ceased to become a performance troupe, transforming into a powerful mercantile and craft guild. The first true Cirque Ringmaster was the legendary Strange Man, who with rousing words and no small amount of murderous persuasion coalesced the ramshackle company into something resembling an organization. It was the Strange Man who created the first troupes and sent them to cities to take control of those markets. To honor their roots as a performance group the Cirque troupes often chose to dress festively and many used carnival acts as inspiration for their symbols and names. At first most of their business was done through strong-arming local merchants or other illegal means. This made the Cirque successful and profitable on a local level, but attained them neither wealth or true power.

This changed in 527 when King Richard I sent a missive to the strongest merchants and tradesmen in the Kingdom and asked that they meet with him in Highcourt. It said that over the four days of the summit, the Cirque either killed all of the major leaders of craft and commerce or recruited them to their ranks. What happened in the meeting was never spoken of, but rumors contend that no small amount of blackmail and promises were employed to convince the King to come to terms. There is a persistent claim that the Cirque pay a substantial amount of coin to the Throne to this very day for the monopoly they enjoy. The truth of this bloody gathering seems to be that King Richard was looking for a way to consolidate and restore the guilds of old all along and that he shrewdly played the Cirque and their rivals against each other to eliminate his foes and get the best deal for the Kingdom.

Not long after the agreement was struck, the Prophet makes their appearance for the first time in 540. Emerging out of the Badlands to the South of the Free City of Orn, this mysterious figure claims to hold the key to the future of the Cirque. They pen a series of prophecies which would come to be known as the Golden Fortunes or Hundred Years Prophecy. The Prophet claims that some of these divinations will inevitably come true over the next century, while some will come to pass only if the Cirque leaders follow the hidden messages that lie within. The Prophet says that at the end of a hundred years, a

great sacrifice and choice will have to be made that will change Arnesse forever, and should the Cirque exact upon them, the Prophet would return to lead them into a glorious new era.

At first, the Cirque leaders are quick to disregard the Golden Fortunes as a ploy. When the first prophecy comes true, some start to believe, but by the second and third, all are convinced. The prophecies are cryptic but seem to contain a series of predictions. Armed with these portents, the Cirque increase their influence, wealth, and standing at an astonishing rate. The Golden Fortunes also contain a series of predictions that will happen only through the undertaking of certain actions. Many of these are seemingly very minor, but several seem to call for radical decisions. A debate emerges within the ranks of the Cirque as to how political they should become. But greed drives the hearts of many and those who counsel to avoid the affairs of kings and nobles are shouted down in favor of pursuing a more dangerous and lucrative course.

The reign of King Richard I comes to an end in 595 and his son Richard II assumes the throne. Richard's reign is marked by the rise of a religion known as the Aurorym. Since the Great War, all religion had been forbidden in Arnesse, but there was a special resonance to this faith that caused it to catch fire among the people. The Golden Fortunes foretold the coming of the Aurorym and their prophet, Magnus Blayne, the Son of Dawn. The Cirque were warned about its dangers. In the lands of House Corveaux, Magnus Blayne, their messiah, sought converts to the Aurorym, but the agents of the Cirque shadowed him and sought to control the expansion of his ministry. After three years, King Richard II finally tired of Blayne and ordered him arrested, which forced the false-prophet into hiding. The Cirque were able to bribe one of his hapless followers into revealing his location. A day later Magnus Blayne was arrested and soon after, the so-called Son of Dawn was put to death.

In the wake of Magnus Blayne's death, King Richard II is murdered by an assassin that is suspected to be a religious zealot. The Cirque's informants gather little information, ascertaining that it is unlikely to be a member of the Aurorym, but another, more cunning faction. The trail runs cold when all who investigate the matter meet gruesome and untimely ends. This proves to be the start of what will become a much larger espionage in later years. Richard II names his daughter, Anne, as his heir apparent, but after his death, his brother James usurps the throne and is crowned King James I under great protest. James reign is short lived as a massive army from House Aragon, led by Hector Aragon, joins with the Corveaux and attacks the Sovereignlands. James I is soundly

defeated at Caddock Tor and is executed as a traitor shortly after. Richard II's rightful heir and daughter, Anne, marries Hector's son, Roland, and the two ascend the throne as King Roland Aragon and Queen Anne in 611.

The Golden Fortunes predicted the rise of Roland Aragon, claiming that a great snake would come to power and that while the snakes ruled, the sun would rise on Arnesse yet set on the Cirque. From the time Roland Aragon takes the throne, doors that were once open to the Cirque, started to close. This was primarily due to two factors. First, the Aragons brought their own merchants from the South, who pushed the nobles to drive out rival guilds so they could take over the market. Second, the Aragons could be an amoral people in many regards, but were indeed opposed to the murder of innocents, slavery, and general thuggery, and the Cirque, rightly or wrongly, were accused of engaging in all three. During the reign of Roland Aragon, Tarkathi merchants flooded into the north and with them came all the exotic perfumes, spices, drugs, and poisons of Tarkath. The new king also elevates a rebellious noble house of the Corveaux family, the Ulsters, to the status of a great house under the new name of Blayne. The Blaynes are zealots and have a history of unswervingly backing the Aurorym. King Roland dissolved the Cirque's monopoly on goods and trade in 614 and almost immediately after, a silent battle in the underworld began that came to be known as the Shadow War. For almost thirty years, spies, informants, ruffians, and assassins fight back and forth, battling for control of territory. In the end, the Cirque as an organization is defeated and driven even deeper into hiding. By 640, the Cirque is close to being extinguished.

Roland I dies in 641 and the Cirque see a narrow opportunity to save themselves. His young son Doran assumes the throne with his treacherous and ambitious Uncle Falk Aragon as his advisor. House Bannon also waits in the wings, eagerly seeking a way to claw their way back into power. The Cirque contact Lord Falk and make an arrangement. Shortly after, Lord Falk offers Doran Aragon's head and the throne to Richard III, son of King James I, in exchange for concessions and the title of Lord Paragon of Tarkath. Richard III, hungry for revenge for the death of his beloved father, accepts the bargain. On the day of Doran Aragon's wedding to Katelyn Valewood, the young king is murdered in cold blood along with his bride. Historians today are firmly confident that the murder of Doran Aragon was a plot between Lord Falk and House Bannon to retake the throne. None suspected the Cirque were the hand who wielded the blade that killed the Aragon king. The Cirque have always been careful to keep this secret. As Richard III takes the throne, the Cirque plot to

retake what they have lost. The remaining Ringmasters then authorize 'total war' on the merchants of Tarkath and commit a desperate act to bolster their ranks. They invite much of the criminal underworld to join them, sanctioning a whole other branch of the Cirque – the Menagerie. With these brutal, immoral shock troops at their command, they execute a coup known as the "Red Night" and over one hundred anti-Cirque merchants and craftsmen leaders are murdered in one evening.

Just when it seems like both sides would be plunged into a second Shadow War, the Prophet returns as promised in 643. What transpires among the Cirque leadership is not known but the Ringmasters make a peace offering to the Tarkathi merchants. Having no stomach for another prolonged and bloody fight, the Tarkathi accept and while many of them flee back to the South, no small number remain in the north and assimilate into the Cirque. The Cirque that emerges from the strife of House Aragon's dominion over Arnesse is profoundly different and stronger than any previous incarnation. The Tarkathi presence opens up markets, goods, and alliances that make the Cirque a truly global organization that has a strong presence in all of the protectorates of the Kingdom. The Cirque also learns a valuable lesson that they can never again be without a viable form of defense against the aggression of a noble or monarch. It is at this point that the Cirque shift from a commerce and tradecraft guild to a paramilitary organization that support those merchants and crafters. The guild's sigil now features the serpent of Tarkath devouring its own tail to represent the fact that the new Cirque was born out of a conflict between those within its own ranks. From this point forward, the serpent symbolism becomes very popular among its members.

By 644 the Prophet has consolidated leadership within the Cirque in the Free City of Orn – a second layer of protection against the interference by the nobility of Arnesse. Lord Falk also delivers on his agreement and King Richard III signs the Artis Compact, which grants the Cirque an exclusive monopoly over tradecraft and commerce once again. Falk has his throat slit while sleeping a few months later and to this day, no one knows if it is the Aragon nobles he betrayed to earn his title or the Cirque wanting to cover up their misdeeds now that he'd outlived his usefulness. This is the first time the Nagas are seen and it is said that their company is placed on permanent retainer in exclusive service to the Cirque. Richard III dies in 663 and while his reign is marked by quite a bit of strife among the nobility, the Cirque experiences a massive resurgence in power and wealth, extending its reach and

influence far into Tarkath. By the time King Richard dies, there are few merchants who do not owe fealty to the Cirque.

In 663, John, Richard III's adopted son and heir is challenged for the throne by his half-brother, Edwin, and Arnesse is plunged into an almost decade-long conflict known as the Brother's War. This is the first time that the Cirque's power is truly put on display. They are extremely prolific in providing supplies to both sides of the conflict but still appearing to be neutral. Both would-be kings attempt to influence elements of the Cirque to their side to limited success, but the guild's rather decentralized nature allow for a troupe or menagerie in each area to appear to ally with a faction yet still have true allegiance to the main guild. At every turn, the Cirque fought and steadfastly refused to be controlled by the nobles; to remain neutral of their politics. Behind the scenes, they were content to deal with issues in their own way, ensuring the protection of their own interests. By the time Edwin emerges as the victor of the Brother's War, the Cirque is known in every part of the Kingdom and establishes itself as a true institution.

Edwin's reign lasts until 692 when a second conflict emerges between several bastards who allege to be his children, and his legitimate daughter, Eleanor. War is good for business and the Cirque once again supplies all parties involved. The Bastards' War is less profitable than the Brother's War as some of the contenders for the throne fail to distinguish friend from foe and do not recognize the Cirque as a neutral party. As a result, many caravans are destroyed or confiscated. This forces the Cirque to almost double the number of mercenaries in their employ. The Naga military forces grow from just over two thousand troops to nearly five thousand among the various guildhalls of the Kingdom. The Bastards' War ends in 700 with the ascension of Queen Eleanor, the true daughter of Edwin I, to the throne. She marries her half-brother Royce Wolf, who becomes King Miles I. The forty years between 663 and 700 are known as the Golden Years by many Cirque as the organization earns more coin than in any of the previous combined. The guild emerges from the Golden Years as one of the wealthiest in the Kingdom.

Queen Eleanor spends nearly all twenty-five of her years on the throne rebuilding Arnesse from the rubble of nearly two decades of war and the Cirque is a vital part of this undertaking. When Queen Eleanor's son Giles I takes the throne in 727, the new king is keenly interested in the revitalization of Arnesse's economy and infrastructure. The first major step he takes is to fully recognize the autonomy and power of the guilds by amending the Artis Compact to

include that no noble can force a member of a guild in good standing into an Oath of Fealty. King Giles I extends the Artis Compact to all guilds in the Kingdom, including the Fayne and the Apotheca, recognizing their respective monopolies. In addition, the king further breaks the protectorates of the Kingdom into boroughs and establishes the position of castellan and sheriff to help administrate these new regions. As a result of the King's actions, the economy in Arnesse booms and towns begin to emerge across the Kingdom. More towns are founded during King Giles I's reign than at any other time in modern history.

Giles I's personal life is nothing short of a disaster. He takes a Bannon bride, Rosalind, with whom he sires a son, Giles. Not long after, he annuls their marriage and she flees to hide in the North with House Hale. The king then marries Lady Elysande of House Corveaux, with whom he has another child, Emma. After several years, rumors of Queen Elysande's infidelity reach the king's ears. She is accused of adultery, tried, and executed for her crimes. A scant year later, Giles I marries another Corveaux Lady, Alice, and makes her his Queen. She dies less than a year later in childbirth. Despite his somewhat sordid personal life, the Cirque supports Giles I without fail, realizing that his policies are the key to their prosperity. During the latter years of Giles's reign, the power of the Aurorym once again begins to surge, particularly in the lands of House Blayne. Word also reaches the Cirque's ears that Giles I's son, Giles, and his mother Rosalind have converted to the faith.

Several years later, King Giles would take a fourth wife, Lady Maeve from House Innis. Whispers, likely started by the Aurorym, begin to sweep across the land that the King had been placed under a spell. When Maeve is announced to be with child, the malcontent rises to a fever pitch and the King's son forms an army to march on Highcourt and dethrone his father as a witch. The conflict that follows is swift and brutal, with the younger Giles's army moving swiftly south, joined by elements of House Hale, House Blayne, and vassals of House Bannon not loyal to the Throne. King Giles I gathers a huge force of loyal banners, including elements of House Corveaux, House Aragon, and House Richter at Lanton in the Sovreignlands but is defeated by the younger Giles's smaller army of zealots and battle hardened troops. The Cirque has little time to react to any of this, but they stage at least one attempt on the younger Giles's life as he makes his way South.

King Giles I is captured after losing the battle and put on trial for witchcraft along with Queen Maeve. They are both found

guilty and executed. Rumor has it that the Queen's son was born but secreted away before he could be killed. Though the child was said to have been murdered, persistent tales have come out of the Thornwood that he was not and instead, lies hidden there under another, secret identity. King Giles II ascends the throne in 751 A.S. and immediately takes a bride from House Blayne, Lady Aline, as his Queen. He grants the great house of Blayne the Hearthlands protectorate, a verdant swath of land that is ceded from House Corveaux.

## THE PRESENT

King Giles II has been in power for twelve years and, in his relentless focus on morality, has neglected the general administration of the Kingdom. As a result, many of his father's accomplishments and gains have fallen by the wayside. Giles II is an Aurorym and extremely moral, seeking to puritanically enforce his world view on whomever he meets. His passing of a set of morality laws in 760 sent shock waves through the courts of Arnesse. These two facts alone have not enamored King Giles II to the Cirque. They are not naïve enough to deny that the king would become a swift enemy, regardless of however much they may bolster his coffers, should he come to discover the extent to which they are involved in the dark dealings of the back-alley economies of Arnesse. Many of the Ringmasters are thankful for the fact that the Menagerie has broken away from the Cirque proper, or is at least perceived as have done so. Yet even they have been forced to tone down or cut back their operations for fear of the King's sheriffs shutting them down. This has forced the Cirque to focus more on its legitimate business fronts, but, empowered by an influx of newfound righteousness, even the concept of Privilege has fallen under scrutiny from some houses in recent years as they feel it unfairly taxes craftsmen and merchants.

The Cirque are quick to blame the Aurorym as the culprits behind this, but are finding themselves torn about the faith in general. All their membership is drawn from the very people the Aurorym seek to aid and empower. A strong commonfolk caste only empowers the Cirque. The message of the faith at its core speaks about equality for all men and seeks to reduce the power of the nobility. The Cirque and the Aurorym have common forces they are seeking to resist but are coming at them from two very different sides. Because of this, some Ringmasters have started to speculate what their world looks like were they to accept the faith rather than trying to find ways to eliminate it. Others still remember the words of the Golden Fortunes that warn against the spread of the faith of Magnus Blayne and are actively seeking to find ways to

monitor and undo the religion's progress. The Prophet has been strangely silent on the matter and many of the Ringmasters are now placed in a position where they must chart their own destiny and navigate treacherous waters alone.

As the King has neglected the daily affairs of the Kingdom's infrastructure and trade, the Cirque has taken the opportunity to consolidate its stranglehold on commerce. The Cirque is the most powerful they have ever been in terms of their wealth and influence. If they managed to agree on a course of action, they could cripple commerce in multiple protectorates and cause revolts in many regions among the commonfolk. But, even as the Cirque's power and wealth has grown, so have the divisions within its ranks. Driven by a combination of rivalry and geographic distance, the troupes and menageries often act as their own independent entities. It is only the powerful and mystic allure of the Prophet, the Prophet's emissaries, and the Nagas which keep the respective Ringmasters in line. The Prophet sows the same amount of terror in the Ringmasters as the Cirque sows in those who oppose it. The organization is facing some difficult choices. The Aurorym continue to grow in strength, dividing the great houses as it does. Multiple conflicts are rising in the Kingdom, including skirmishes between House Richter and Innis in the north. Rumors spread that the Aragons have once again cast their opalescent, serpentine gaze toward the north, and now a new land has emerged where there was none before – the Annwyn. The Cirque must establish a foothold there. They have always remained neutral, but there is a palpable concern among many of the Ringmasters that the land is inching close to that which has not happened in three centuries – a conflict among all the great houses. Should that happen, the Cirque may have to finally decide where it stands.

For now, many of the Ringmasters have taken a wait-and-see approach in the affairs of the realm. They are content to listen, watch and make careful, calculated moves. The Snakes have the luxury of time and perspective and none are rushing to decide when they certainly don't have to. Their grip on the commerce monopoly is still strong. There are active concerns that King Giles II may uncover information about Cirque operations and tire of his association with them. The Cirque has been careful to keep the darker side of its business away from the prying eyes of House Bannon. Should it become an issue, the matter would have to be dealt with quickly and quietly. The Cirque will do business with anyone but would not be quick to throw their support behind any great power but their own. That does not stop nobles and other powers from courting them as allies and while the Cirque refuses to join itself with any house, it remains friendly with almost

everyone. This has led many to believe the Cirque are not a threat or a consideration in the great game of politics. Yet history has proven that when this this often-underestimated faction puts its mind to an end it can have a quiet, but profound effect upon the entire Kingdom.

# THE TROUPES



## SUMMARY

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### RANKING AND SENIORITY

TROUPER

JOURNEYMAN

TRADESMAN

MASTER

RINGMASTER

### LOCALES

#### GOLDEN HALL

The Free City of Orn rests luxuriously on the southwestern coast of Arnesse and is the only part of the continent not under the rule of the King. The stories behind why the Free City became free is lost to time, but it is said that its origins predate the Great War and that it was one ruled by Dragon Princes from a distant land. Today, the city is ruled by a council of Merchant Princes and is the wealthiest city in the known world. Orn is a labyrinth of winds, crisscrossing alleys, narrow crookback streets, and markets. It is also home to the largest trading port in Arnesse and a center of both learning and culture. Here, beyond the reach of the King of Arnesse, lies the Golden Hall, headquarters of the Cirque. Built of solid sandstone, this impressive structure dominates a significant portion of the Wheel of Gold, where much of Orn's commerce takes place.

The Golden Hall is named so for its great hall that is covered in pure gold. From the very walls themselves to the adornments, the wealth and prestige of the Cirque is on full display for all to see. It is to the Golden Hall that all Privilege is ultimately paid and it is to the Prophet, Ringmaster of the Free City of Orn, that all other Ringmasters reluctantly bend a knee. Many have speculated what terrible power this mysterious Ringmaster must have to force so many insidious powerful people to bend to their will. The Golden Hall also contains the headquarters of the Nagas, the mercenary company exclusively employed by the Cirque. They have at least a thousand trained soldiers within the city at any time to ensure the safety of the guild's investments and properties. While the Golden Hall is functional as a commerce hub, half of the colossal structure is dedicated to the administrative

offices required to run and organize a faction as large and diverse as the Cirque.

#### THE ROYAL EXCHANGE

Situated in the Artisan's Quarter not far from King's Market, is the Royal Exchange, the Cirque's guildhall in Highcourt. It is a modest building that, while well appointed, resembles many of the others around it. More so than other guildhalls, the Royal Exchange is a functioning center of business for the Cirque and at any given time of the day, is often bustling with merchant caravans. There is a section of the Exchange dedicated to auctions, all manner of going up for sale on the block daily. Those wishing to sell nearly anything can come to the Royal Exchange and likely be offered a fair price for their goods.

Given that Highcourt is one of the largest trading centers in all the Kingdom, the Exchange is one of the busiest guildhalls in Arnesse. To the casual observer, it can be a dizzying hive of activity that often seems more like organized chaos than efficiency. But appearances can be deceiving, as the Ringmistress of the Cirque, Midnight Rose, keeps a tight watch over the operation and even tighter books. Those that are careless or lax find her to be unforgiving. Those who would steal or seek undue profit for themselves find her overly efficient in plugging leaks. Few guildhalls in the Kingdom are as profitable and those Cirque who work there and are successful often find their purses significantly fattened by the experience. That being said, while the Cirque of Highcourt are an exceedingly urbane lot, they are extremely political. Competition here is fierce and often fatal, an atmosphere that Midnight Rose encourages to ensure she works with the best.

#### THE LYCEUM

The Aragon city of Taliesin is the second largest trading venue in Arnesse. Situated at the South end of the Aurean Road on the borders of Tarkath, it sees an immense amount of trade from cities both north and south. Ruled by Lord Rylen Aragon, the city has come under new leadership within the last decade. Under the previous rulers from House Pyon, the city was little more than a haven for criminals and the outcast. Now, Lord Rylen and his Corveaux wife have restored order and profitability to Taliesin. Under the Pyons, the Cirque as a formal business entity could not exist. The Troupes were long ago run out of the city and the guildhall had been reduced to rubble. As a sign of good faith to the Cirque, Lord Rylen had a new guildhall built in the city's Golden Quarter. Named the Lyceum, it is an impressive structure made of white Tarkathi

stone and marble. Built in the style of the Southern Lords it is considered one of the most beautiful and luxurious guildhalls.

Few are permitted to explore the Lyceum's halls but it is said to contain not only the expected amenities, such as offices, workshops, and storage, but also those befitting a noble, like baths, a theater, gardens, and several very well-appointed suites. The Ringmaster of Taliesin, Grandpa Hussan, makes his home here, taking full advantage of his wealthy lifestyle and fine apartments. Hussan has been in the Cirque many years and was once in charge of the Black Market within Taliesin. When the city came under Lord Rylen's rule, he saw the rebuilding of the guildhall as an opportunity to increase his station and leave the Menagerie. Grandpa Hussan and his Troupers wear their newfound riches, wealth, and position like ill-fitting clothes, a fact which is rumored to rub the Lord and Lady of Taliesin the wrong way. There are whispers that House Aragon grows tired of Grandpa's ham-fisted administration and excessive, nouveau riche lifestyle, and that they seek to replace him with someone they feel can better represent Taliesin and support their future vision of the city.

#### THE PRESTIGE

The city of Scrow in the Hearthlands is known far and wide for being the biggest trade hub in all Arnesse. Nearly every trade good taken overland between the North and the South flows through its twisted, muddy streets. It would be easy to believe that Scrow is a city of bustling markets, but its streets are surprisingly devoid of any signs of business or commerce. This is because the Cirque does not encourage craftsmen and merchants within the city, instead choosing to simply tax and fleece those foreign trade caravans that pass through Scrow on their way north and south. The few craftsmen and merchants that do operate in the city are heavily taxed by Privilege to Carmilla, the Ringmistress of Scrow, and her ruthless gang, the Ten Knives. Most of the Cirque in Scrow don't make their money through legitimate means, but have stakes in a business, skim money from some endeavor, steal it from one another, or just beat it from people outright.

Cirque operate out of a run-down former theater known as the Prestige. Whereas once it hosted shows and performances, now it is little more than a den of vice and iniquity. There, Carmilla and her Ten Knives spend their 'hard-earned' coin on drink, gambling, and sex. Carmilla largely uses the Prestige as a front for her many businesses, including a brothel known as the Sword and Sheath. The Ten Knives teach no craft, take no apprentices, and produce very little, but they have grown fat off the rich trade that flows through the city. As long as they pay a kickback to Lord Paragon

Frederick Blayne, they are free to do as they like. The fact that Carmilla is also the sister of Lord Frederick's wife also makes them almost immune to any level of prosecution under the King's Law. It is said that the Lord Paragon uses the Ten Knives as an off-the-books city guard to handle affairs that require special kinds of attention.

#### THE CHARNEL HOUSE

Far to the north of most civilized cities of Arnesse, lies the freeport of Scyld. Overseen by House Rourke, it is a town of ruffians, scoundrels, and brigands, where few laws are honored and only the strong survive. One would think that the Cirque would not operate out of such a dangerous location, especially considering their tense relationship with the Lords of the Sea. But Scyld is the largest trade port in the North and despite the odds, the Cirque have carved out a presence there. Scyld is not like most towns and does not have traditional markets and merchant shops. The number of actual legitimate shop-fronts and permanent markets is low because of the amount of smuggled and illegal goods that come through the town. Instead, goods are moved by a variety of merchants who set up temporary 'pop shops' or auctions throughout the city. As a result, the Cirque of Scyld have become experts at transporting and selling goods, regardless of their legality.

Some say that that the only reason the Cirque has prospered in such a hostile place is Mama Bones, the Ringmistress of Scyld. Rumors about her origins are the source of many a tavern tale, but the most common seem to agree that she is a bone priestess from the Everfrost who was once an advisor to the former Ringmaster, Ozymandius the Fat. When he died under extremely mysterious circumstances, Mama Bones took leadership and, according to the stories, had all Ozymandius's former troupe murdered in cold blood. She then allegedly raised their bodies from the dead and kept their spirits captive, enslaved to her will. The Death Jesters, as they are now called, serve Mama Bones and no one else. The troupe operates out of an abandoned temple of Lirit that the locals call the Charnel House and what goes on within is a source of wild speculation and dread among the local populace. It's common in Scyld to say that if someone goes missing in the night that they either ended up on a ship that's already far out to sea or lying on a slab in the Charnel House. It is likely the terrifying and mysterious nature of the Scyld Cirque that allows them to be so successful, keeping others well out of their affairs.

## USHER HALL

The city of Ember in the Dusklands is a hub of industry and production in Arnesse. The forges of the city are said to burn day and night, hammering out goods and products to feed the Kingdom's war machines. There, in the heart of Ember Alley, sits Usher Hall, a massive iron and stone construction that serves as a physical testament to the craftsmanship of the Cirque who make the Dusklands their home. For centuries, the great forges of Usher Hall have made some of the finest works of metal in the Kingdom. Smiths and artificers alike came from all around to train and perfect their craft. Usher Hall is especially unique as it is said to contain an anvil made of dragonsteel, one of the few metals that can hold up to forging weapons and armor of unique and rare alloys. Until a few years ago, the Ringmaster of Ember was Osbern the Hammer, a famed smith that held leadership in the Cirque for the better part of thirty years. He was to be the last in a long line of honorable and respected tradesmen that had run the Cirque in Ember. For centuries, an agreement stood where the smiths of the Cirque and House Richter would work side-by-side for the greater benefit of the house and the Kingdom.

When he died, Vinson the Groom, an outcast member of Carmilla's Ten Knives, brought in a gang of ruffians named the Iron Bloods and took over the Cirque in Ember. Being as many Usher Hall's Cirque were not skilled in fighting, they quickly surrendered and accepted Vinson's leadership. Since then, the forges of Usher Hall have grown colder and less and less apprentices are taking up the crafts. Vinson has made it no secret that his preference is for a man who can fight. As a result, the Iron Bloods don't take many crafters among their ranks but ruthlessly extort the tradesmen of Ember for Privilege. This upset a delicate balance that has existed for centuries between House Richter and the Cirque, and Lord Paragon Hawken Richter has taken notice. Since Vinson has taken over, Lord Richter has been trying to find a way to get the Ringmaster removed and replaced. Vinson, aware of Lord Richter's distaste for him, has sworn that he will see the Lord Paragon undone and has already taken steps to encourage dissent among his nobles.

## KING'S HALL

The city of King's Crossing in the Midlands is second only to Scrow in caravan traffic of the Kingdom. Ruled by Lord Garamond Corveaux, this city has seen a resurgence of late with the revitalization of Taliesin and the political maneuverings of his wife, the Bannon-born Lady Jocelyn. King's Hall lies just off center in King's Crossing and is in

many ways a spoke for trade caravans coming from the north, south, east, and west. Even the Royal Exchange in Highcourt pales in comparison to the sheer amount of goods that come and go through this guildhall every day. Overseeing it all is Otho the Raven, Ringmaster of King's Crossing. Otho is known for two things. He is an exceedingly intelligent man that is said to plan things out to excruciating detail. The second is that he keeps meticulous records about everything from contents of merchant caravans and their destinations to the affairs that go on with the wealthy and powerful of King's Crossing. Otho's network of spies and informants is rivaled only by the Sisters of the Fayne Moirai and of House Aragon.

While Otho keeps much of what he elucidates a secret, he is known to use it from time to time to keep the peace or gain an advantage. He takes the keenest interest in the affairs of rival troupes nearest him in Taliesin, Scrow, and Highcourt. Otho is served in his ends by the High Street Kings, who are a regular sight within Weaver's Cross, the central district of King's Crossing. The High Street Kings are largely a benevolent and even helpful force in King's Crossing, serving to keep the peace and ensure that the caravans continue to run effectively and on-time. Otho is the only Ringmaster who has refused to have the Nagas in his service. Instead, the High Street Kings serve as guards for the guildhall and local caravans. Rumors say that this is because the Corveauxs have little tolerance for the presence of such a disdainful mercenary company within their borders. Despite his incessant information gathering and espionage, Otho remains one of the most upstanding and benevolent Ringmasters in all Arnesse.

## MAJOR MEMBERS AND FIGURES

### The Prophet

Age: ??

The leader of the Cirque is a figure shrouded in mystery. The Prophet is the head of the Cirque within the Free City of Orn but is also the strongest and most respected Ringmaster in Arnesse. It is expected that all Privilege for the organization is ultimately paid to Orn and the Golden Hall. Rarely seen in public, the Prophet appears as a figure shrouded in ornate white robes whose face is covered in a mask of gold. Whether the Prophet is a man or a woman is unknown and irrelevant for all intents and purposes. Legends say that they simply walked out of the wastes of Tarkath over a century ago offering a prophecy to the Cirque that has borne fruit many times over. There are those who whisper that the Prophet is immortal and still others who say they are different people who take the mantle of leadership when their predecessor

dies. Another popular rumor is that the Prophet is actually a secret member of the Fayne Moirai. One thing for certain however, is that the Prophet has led the Cirque on a successful and profitable path for decades. While many have sought to depose them of power, the Prophet's mysterious and elusive nature have made making any direct moves against them very difficult. They are represented to the world by a series of emissaries that travel Arnesse and serve as their eyes, ears, hands. While the Prophet's secretive nature has led some to believe they are ignorant of the machinations within the Cirque, the wise within the organization know that there is a good reason why some of the most dangerous and dreaded figures in Arnesse fear the white-shrouded figure.

### **Grandpa Hussan**

Age: 56

In an organization full of extreme and eccentric personalities, Grandpa Hussan is no exception. He appears as a lean, older man in his fifties, skin tanned to a deep brown, rough and wrinkled like old leather. Those who meet him are often disarmed by his affable nature and warm, welcoming demeanor. He is a teller of tales and singer of songs, a lover of life, women, and drink. But the wise know that Hussan is as much a snake as any Ringmaster and that his pleasant exterior hides the heart of a man who spent decades leading an underworld menagerie full of murderous thugs and black-market merchants. It is only in recent years, since he stepped into the leadership of the Cirque in Taliesin, that he has affected the air of one more urbane and civilized. As Grandpa revels in his newfound wealth and lavish lifestyle, he speaks often of his youth in the Free City of Orn, where he grew up on the streets, having to scrape by on scraps. These days the Ringmaster spends much of his time in the Lyceum, hosting parties, feasts, and performances. While he bathes in his heated baths and enjoys the company of beautiful women and men, his organization is beset on two sides. The Cirque in Taliesin has grown wealthier in the last decade, but much of that success has seen its way into the hands of the leadership alone. This has created a growing divide among the Krait troupe, that some feel is going to soon lead to open conflict. It is also said that Lord Rylen Aragon, the ruler of Taliesin, encouraged by his Corveaux wife, grows weary of Hussan's very public excesses and generally lawless behavior. While he has yet to do so, it may only be a matter of time before Rylen seeks to have him replaced. Hussan, confident in his ability to "...manage the people as he always has," is content to enjoy himself, no matter the cost.

### **Carmilla, the Bloody Bitch**

Age: 46

Scrow is a city of incredible dichotomies. The newfound wealth of House Blayne represented in the central Magnus District is a glimpse of a city on the brink of greatness. But within the shadows of its majestic buildings and resplendent rectorix sits Old Town, home to some of the poorest and most deplorable living conditions in Arnesse. It is into the world of the latter that Carmilla was born. She and her older sister, Paloma, were the beautiful daughters of the local Cirque Ringmaster, Vitus Pilar. Of the two, Carmilla was the most like her father, little more than a street urchin and thief from a young age. Paloma proved to be unsuitable for the streets, her father paying to have her educated and groomed as a prize for a proper husband. Vitus determined that Carmilla, made unmarriageable by a nasty facial scar received during her first knife fight, would succeed him as Ringmaster. Paloma would go on to marry Lord Paragon Frederick Blayne and Carmilla would take her father's place as head of the Cirque. Carmilla's a product of the brutal streets of Scrow. She is cold, unforgiving, cunning, and murderous. This has earned her the title, "The Bloody Bitch," but few would risk calling her that to her face. A lifetime of surviving in the slums of Old Town has taught her not only wisdom, but how to be deadly in combat. She has a quick temper and little patience for fools. Those who garner her ire quickly find their throats slit, or worse. It's said that Carmilla harbors resentment towards her sister Paloma, who inherited a life of luxury and privilege, while she was forced to live forever in her shadow. She is also known to have an intense rivalry with Vinson the Groom of Ember. The origins of the feud are well documented in that Vinson and Carmilla were once lovers, but had a falling out when Vinson found another woman. On the day of Vinson's wedding, Carmilla found them and killed his bride by having her eaten alive by rats as he watched. In a rare display of mercy, or perhaps love, she let Vinson live. He fled to the Richter city of Ember in the Dusklands. There, he took over the Cirque and formed his own troupe named the Iron Bloods. Since then, Vinson the Groom has vowed to get revenge on Carmilla at any cost.

### **Midnight Rose**

Age: 38

Midnight Rose is a bit of anomaly in the Cirque. Everyone knows that the Cirque almost exclusively recruits from the lower classes and those of noble blood are rarely allowed in, let alone permitted to obtain significant rank. Though she has done her best to hide it, many know that Midnight Rose was once a highborn, a daughter of the Suthwater Corveaux.

When she was barely a teen she was taken hostage by the Cirque and held for ransom due to some outstanding familial unpaid debts. Unable to pay the ransom, the family instead abandoned her. She was then sold to the Menagerie and forced to work off those debts as both a servant and prostitute. Rose was owned by the Menagerie for many years and while she suffered incredibly, she also learned much. At age nineteen she killed the Menagerie Underking who owned her, Laren Longfingers, and instead of returning to her ancestral roots, turned her back on the Corveauxs and formed a troupe of her own. By twenty-five she was the head of a powerful troupe known as the Blue Bloods and paid a visit to her family in Orgonne. She killed her father and mother in cold blood along with both her older brother and older sister. Rose only left her youngest brother alive as he was not old enough to have done anything to help her. Rose then changed her name to Midnight Rose, donning the blue of Corveaux yet darkened to almost black. She would go on to prosper in the Cirque, rising in the ranks until she was eventually assigned to Highcourt as the Ringmistress by the Prophet. Midnight Rose is a cool, efficient, and extremely by-the-book woman who does not suffer fools. Those who have tried to court or seduce her have found she has little time for emotions or other pleasantries - she's killed more than one man who's tried. She has been raised by the Cirque and sees whatever she has today as just recompense for the horrors she endured to get to where she is.

### **Vinson the Groom**

Age: 40

The Cirque of Ember were once focused almost exclusively on the art of crafting. That was until Vinson the Groom came with his band of Iron Bloods, driving out or killing the old leadership. Vinson grew up on the streets of Scrow as a member of the Ten Knives, under the leadership of Vitus Pilar. Vinson has always been a hot head and bully since he was young. A good-looking man, he was a bit of a heart-breaker and well known for his string of lovers. Vinson rose quickly through the ranks of the Ten Knives until he was one of Vitus's Masters, running a whole district of Scrow. He would go on to become lovers with Carmilla, Vitus's daughter and heir apparent to leadership of the Cirque, for several years. Vinson, never satisfied with his lot in life, found the daughter of a wealthy merchant and fell in love. Seeking to escape the life, he jilted Carmilla, marrying the merchant's daughter in secret. Carmilla found out and caught them both. She spared Vinson but made him watch as his new bride was eaten alive by rats. Vinson fled the city but swore an oath he would see Carmilla dead by his hands. Since then Vinson has turned into little more than a nasty cur with no regard for his

own life - this makes him exceedingly dangerous. He sees the Iron Bloods as a tool to accomplish his goals and he will use the Cirque's power as a means to his vengeance. There are plenty in Ember, Scrow, and even the Noctuary who want to stop him, yet thus far he's proven cunning enough to not only stay alive, but one step ahead of his enemies. Given House Richter's interference in his business of late, Vinson has recently made it no secret that he wants to see Lord Paragon Hawken Richter removed from power by his own hand. The Ringmaster is playing a dangerous game of intrigue that involves many powerful figures in the region. It would take but one misstep to send all his plans into chaos and ruin.

### **Mama Bones**

Age: 60+

Of all the major Ringmasters in Arnesse, the least is known about the leader of the Cirque of Scyld, Mama Bones. There are many rumors as to her origins, but the only thing on which anyone can seem to agree is that she's from the savage north of Everfrost. Those who have met her describe an elderly woman likely past her sixtieth winter, her eyes milky white with blindness. She dresses in the style of the northern clans, all animal pelts and furs with jewelry made of bones and sinew. True to her namesake, she often has her face painted in black and white to resemble a skull or death mask. To look at her one would not think she would lead a troupe in the Cirque but ever since she was brought to Scyld by her former employer Ozymandius the Fat, Mama Bones has made it her home. While she may appear blind, those that claim to have made her acquaintance say that she knows and sees much. Unlike many Ringmasters, Mama Bones seems largely unconcerned with the affairs of goods, commerce, and coin. She seems to be playing some other game entirely and is perhaps using her role to some mysterious end. There are some who say she is searching for something and few could think of a better place to look than one of the most exotic ports in all Arnesse. The rare times she is seen is public, she is always accompanied by a band of her Death Jesters and her massive brute of a bodyguard known as Blood Skull, for the skull mask he wears, said to be covered in the blood of those he has slain. Under previous Ringmasters, business in Scyld had proven to be quite lucrative but under Mama Bones it's grown stagnant, the flow of Privilege to the Golden Hall out of the city slowing to a trickle. While quite a few in the Cirque are dissatisfied with what is happening in Scyld, even more are scared of what Mama Bones will do if threatened. Considering the risks involved and the existing relationship with House Rourke, some Cirque leaders have considered abandoning Scyld altogether, shifting their resources to

Ringmistress Ruby the Razor at Grimfrost Keep.

### **Otho the Raven**

Age: 42

Otho the Raven has an interesting history. Before he joined the Cirque he was a member of the Apotheca and served as a magister to Lord Jean Luc Corveaux, the father of the current Lord of King's Crossing, Garamond Corveaux. Otho was a fine magister and good at his job. That was until he met Justine, a local merchant and fell desperately in love with her. Instead of breaking his vow of celibacy he left the Apotheca amid a great deal of controversy. He was forced to swear an oath to never reveal or share the secrets or knowledge he learned. Were it not for his connections among the Corveaux nobility, he may not be alive today. But Otho has proven true to his oath and never shared what he knew; even today he is reluctant to talk about his time in the Apotheca. He married Justine and became a merchant, quickly proving he was as skilled in trading as he ever was in the arts of the Apotheca. He was eventually recruited by the local Cirque troupe, and he quickly moved through the ranks given his acumen at both record-keeping and information gathering. In time, he became a Master, presiding over his own section of the city. Soon after, he came across information that implicated the current Ringmaster of King's Crossing, the Sandman, in an attempt to kill the son of Lord Jean Luc, Lord Garamond. Apparently, members of the Corveaux family, led by Lord Garamond, had come out strongly against the Cirque's corrupt Nagas and were actively trying to get them removed from King's Crossing. Otho informed the Corveauxs and the Sandman was arrested, tried, and executed. Otho then stepped into the position of Ringmaster, backed by his troupe of High Street Kings and the Lord of King's Crossing. He immediately causes controversy among the Cirque when he dismisses the Nagas from the city and replaces them with his own High Street Kings. Otho has been Ringmaster for the better part of four years and is still consolidating his power. He has the backing of the Corveaux nobility and many allies, yet those who served the Sandman and the Nagas still lurk in the shadows, waiting for a chance at their revenge. Otho is a brilliant, quiet sort of man that reflects his many years as a magister. Only a fool would mistake his placid demeanor for weakness. He is more well informed than most anyone in Arnesse and is known to be as brutal and efficient as any in the Cirque when cornered. He and Justine have four children and in the sea of thieves that is the Cirque, Otho is at his core a decent and grounded family man.

## THE TRADITIONS OF THE TROUPES

### CARNIE CODE

Whomever has said there is no honor among thieves is mistaken. From the earliest days, the Cirque le Soir had a code kept among its players; a set of rules all were expected to follow and from which none were exempt. This code came to be known as the Carnie Code and while the rules have changed greatly, the name has survived to the modern day. When the Menagerie formed in 643, the Carnie Code was modified to include a separate set of rules for them. These rules are one of the few things which bind most Cirque, especially those in the Menagerie. While some parts of the code are guidelines and not often punishable, there are some that are considered grounds for very serious punishment up to and including expulsion from the Cirque, or even death.

Many Cirque violations of the code are not resolved via formal legal proceedings. Typically, an accusation is made in public that the code was broken. The accused can then either admit to the violation or deny it. If the accused admits to the violation they can try to make it right or they can elect to submit themselves to the "will of the crowd" and let their fellow guildmates judge what punishment is appropriate. Those Cirque who are popular or feared among their ranks will often elect to submit to the will of the crowd and rely on the fact that people will go light on them. If the accused denies the violation, it is then taken to the highest-ranking guild member present, who then hears the evidence and decides an outcome. The Ringmaster is the ultimate authority in Cirque justice and can override any decision. They don't do it often because they like to keep the peace among their ranks.

Cirque disputes are generally resolved in one of two ways. Either one or both parties "making good" to settle the dispute or will elect to settle it in a "Ring of Blood." The Ring of Blood is like a duel in that two parties settle their dispute through martial combat, the defining difference being that there is generally no arbiter, no agreements, and no rules. A ring is drawn on the ground and both combatants cut their hands before they enter, vowing not to leave the circle unless one or the other is dead. Their bloody hands are then tied together and the two are left to fight, indicating their bond in blood. The Ring of Blood is often a last option for many as it is almost always lethal for one or both combatants.

- I. Honor the code and no law before it.
- II. If you are caught, you acted alone.

- III. Never betray the guild or its secrets to outsiders.
- IV. A deal is a deal.
- V. A contract is a contract is a contract.
- VI. Place nothing above profit.
- VII. Do not tarnish the reputation of the guild with your actions.
- VIII. Be honest in business.
- IX. You have no business in the black market.
- X. Defend the guild against all who would do it harm.

## CARNIE CANT

Those who hear people in the Cirque speak will often swear that they're speaking their own sort of language. And they would often be right. Over the years, the Cirque has developed its own lingo which has come to be known as Carnie Cant. These words and phrases are born from the days when it was a performance group, but since then, terms have been added or altered. The Cirque uses the cant to further distinguish itself from non-Cirque, yet it also has had the added benefit of allowing guild members to talk about those things they may not otherwise want others to elucidate. Particularly those matters of the illicit or illegal. The Cant can vary from region to region, but there are some terms which have become canon in the speech.

**Showman's Rest** – Name of a graveyard used by the Cirque to bury their members.

**Route** — The way travelled by a Cirque caravan from town to town.

**Route Book** — Like the "captain's log" of a ship, the route book contains notes about each stop.

**Roustabout** — Slang term for a worker who gets paid to work for the Cirque but is typically not a member.

**Ringmaster** — Highest rank in the Cirque. In charge of a broad area of Arnesse and all its Guild Halls.

**Rat Sheets** — Posters with negative claims about the opposition.

**Privilege** — The fee paid to the Cirque for the right to have a presence at a market.

**Pitchmen** — The public face of the Cirque, acting as diplomats or negotiators.

**Picture Gallery** — A Cirque who's covered in tattoos, typically related to the deeds they've done.

**Paper** — Posters or advertisements for a market.

**Paid Off in the Dark** — Term for a bribe or a buy-off.

**Opposition Paper** — Advertising posters put up by competing merchants.

**Night Riders** — Bill posters for competing markets or merchants, who posted paper for their employers in a civil fashion by day and tore down or covered up the bills for their competition by night.

**Mud Show** — A smaller market often in rural areas.

**Midway** — The term the Cirque use to refer to the market or marketplace.

**Boss Hostler** — The man who is the boss/leader of a Cirque caravan.

**Tentmaster** — The master of market who collects the market fees and makes sure everything runs smoothly.

**Hits** — Good places to paste posters and advertisements.

**Heat Merchant** — A merchant who's selling items that are often less than legal.

**Grouch Bag** — A small bag or purse worn under the clothing, carrying valuables.

**Zanies** – Cheap thugs who dress like clowns usually used for hits or intimidation.

**Wood** – Term used for something phony used to dupe someone. Wooden coins in a bag to make it feel heavier.

**Trouper** – The lowest rank in a troupe.

**Toby news** - Gossip and rumors from the street.

**Taps** - Regular customers who come back to a market to buy again and again.

**Tack Spitter** – A person who puts posters up.

**Swag** – Goods, usually low in quality but cheap.

**Style** - Strike a pose that invites applause. Often used in the phrase, "Style and smile."

**Stand** - A place a caravan stops and sells.

**Stalls** – A places where merchants sell their wares.

**Spectacle/Spec** - The name for when the Cirque caravans come to town and put up a market.

**Sledge Gang** – A name for a crew of workmen not in the Cirque undergo construction efforts on behalf of the guild.

**Fink** — Anything broken.

**Clem** — A fight.

**Cirky** — Slang terminology for anyone in the Cirque. "He's a Cirky, just like us."

**Candy** — Very cheap goods often encased in deceptively impressive packaging. Or a low-quality item that looks good but is not.

**Cake** — Money made through easy business deals, usually from gullible customers.

**Bunce** — Profits.

**Bill** — An advertising poster.

**Two-Way Joint** — A deal that's so good that both sides make out well in it.

**Touch** — The price asked (and inevitably gotten) for an item or deal. "I moved those items for a five-gold touch."

**Strong-arm** — To put a lot of pressure on someone for a reason, usually to pay money or agree to a deal.

**Slick** — To slick someone is to catch them in the act of doing something.

**Score** — To separate a mark from a significant amount of cash.

**Mark** — Someone you believe to be a conspicuously easy victim. It can have a sinister intent to indicate someone to be killed.

**Freak(er)** — The name usually given to a member of the menageries.

**Nut** — The "overhead," or operating expenses of an endeavor or the base cost of the item. A merchant or crafter always seeks to "make the nut" and begin making a profit above expenses. "I can't charge you any less than three gold and still make my nut."

**X** — A guarantee of exclusivity. An X may be purchased, or it may be offered to sweeten the deal. If you can't work because someone else has the X, you've been "X'ed out."

**Earner** - A member who brings in a lot of money for the guild.

**Eat Alone** - To keep for oneself; to be greedy.

**Lookie Loos** - Non-Cirque individuals.

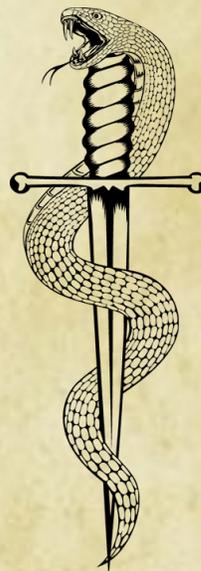
**Ducat** - Term sometimes used to refer to coins.

## CIRQUE CULTURE

The Cirque consider themselves a breed apart from the rest of Arnesse. Though they would not deign to betray their feelings, there is a sense of camaraderie among their number that has, over the years, developed into a sort of xenophobia. The Cirque will entertain, do business deals with, and even fraternize among non-Cirque. But when it comes to sharing secrets or getting close to non-Cirque, many members of the guild are reluctant to let others anywhere near their circle. This has a lot to do with the fact that many of the Cirque have seen a great deal of hardship, finding their way to the guild through difficult roads and frequent persecution based on their lot. When they found the Cirque, it was a place that accepted them, regardless of their background, who they were, or what they'd done before. This ultimately created a culture where "outsiders" or "Lookie Loos" were not welcome within the Cirque's inner circles. This is especially true for those of noble birth. Most Cirque don't trust nobles as far as they can throw them. Entanglements with the nobility only go so far as pleasantries and matters of business. Almost all in the guild will do their best to stay out of politics and complicated schemes with the highborn.

Perhaps as an extension of their own cultural xenophobia, members of the Cirque tend to be extremely factionalized, even within their own ranks. When a Cirque troupe or menagerie sets up in a town, they lay a claim to their own bit of territory and broadcast this to any other groups in the area, expecting others of their ilk to honor their claim. This means that any Cirque who enter another's territory are expected to do so unarmed and only remain if they are permitted to do so. To do otherwise is to invite a fight, the results of which can be lethal. The victors will also often take captives and ransom them back to their troupe or menagerie for a handsome profit. Though wars are uncommon, it is not unheard of for two factions to come to blows for control of prime territory, to settle disagreements, or just over personal matters or slights that escalate too far.

## THE NAGAS



The Nagas are the personal mercenary company in retainer to the Cirque. They are easily identified by their symbol – a dagger entwined by a serpent, and many members are well known for wearing dark armor and clothing that has serpentine motifs. The Nagas are broken into groups they call "Nests" that are stationed within guildhalls throughout Arnesse. Any prominent member of the Cirque can a Naga garrison in an amount commensurate with the size and profitability of their location or personal wealth. The local Cirque are expected to pay the Nagas their standard rate of service and house them in suitably decent accommodations. For smaller guildhalls, the amount of Nagas they keep onsite is largely dependent on what they can afford.

The Nagas are used to guard the guildhalls, patrol markets, or escort caravans. There are rumors that the Nagas are sometimes used for less reputable tasks, but the mercenary company undeniably contends that they are no one's hired thugs. Indeed, this small but capable group has proven time and time again that they are both well trained and deadly in combat. They are best known for light weapon fighting and often employ a dizzying array of movements and acrobatics in combat. True to the snake symbolism in their sigil, it is not entirely uncommon for them to employ poisons in combat, a fact that has instilled fear in many of their opponents. The Nagas may be in the employ of the Cirque, yet their loyalties only extend as far as the coin they are paid. While in most cases, these mercenaries side with their employers, there have been several prominent cases where they disagreed with a prominent Cirque leader, who shortly thereafter found themselves defenseless when a rival came calling.

## PRIVILEGE

The concept of Privilege was implemented in accordance with the Cirque's monopoly on crafting and trade. Privilege is defined as a set amount of coin that is paid to the Cirque by a merchant or tradesman who is doing work or selling goods within a troupe or menagerie's domain. Those who pay the Privilege find that they receive reasonable placement at most local markets for a reasonable rate. They also find regular and reliable access to local goods and supplies. The last benefit is that they have the full protection of the Cirque, both at market and away from market. Thieves and bandits are a common sight in Arnesse and few merchants or tradesmen can afford to hire any sort of regular protection. Those who fail to pay find that they are often shut out entirely of local markets, lose access to local goods, or are charged exorbitant rates for nearly everything. They may be socially shunned and if they continue to fail in their payments they could be brought up on charges for failing to obey the King's Law. So too are there stories of them also having unfortunate accidents, their goods or shops destroyed in a fire or having a bad run-in with some thugs who mugged them and took their coin. There is a minimum amount of Privilege that must be paid, but some local Cirque leaders have been known to demand more during a very lucrative period or in very wealthy areas.

In each region, only a small number of the total artisans, merchants, and tradesmen are members of the Cirque itself. Many work independently or in the employ of a local noble household. For independents, the Cirque will typically collect Privilege from them every month or whenever they are at market, but agreements as to when the individual pays are up

to a local leader's discretion. The Cirque may also accept trade or other items in lieu of coin, but this is a rare exception. If a merchant or a craftsman is in the employ of a noble, they are still expected to pay Privilege. Since many of these individuals receive stipends however, their lord or lady will often pay the Privilege instead. A noble has no right to exempt anyone from Privilege under law of the Artis Compact. Signed by the King's hand, it empowers the Cirque to collect dues in an amount commensurate to the income of the merchant or tradesman. The local Cirque leader will often assign a member of the guild to oversee collection of the Privilege. This duty has been nicknamed the Ducat Grabber and only those who are greatly trusted are chosen.

The Cirque members are also expected to pay Privilege to their local leader as well, typically in an amount similar to the local merchants and tradesmen. It's not uncommon for those Cirque of higher rank to be asked to pay more, especially if they are in the known employ of a noble or receiving a fixed retainer fee. This Privilege is then collected by the local leader of the Cirque and a portion is kept for the local guild. The remainder is expected to be delivered to the Emissary of the Prophet from the Free City of Orn, typically every three moons. This emissary also acts as an assessor who uses their information on the local market and general wealth of the area to determine if the payment is appropriate. If the Emissary determines that the Privilege is less than expected, this is called "coming in light," and is almost always considered bad. Typically, the local Cirque will be expected to turn over that amount in addition to the expected Privilege on the next visit. Those who "come in light" more than a few times find the cost for withholding profit is indeed more than they are able to afford.

## TRADE ROUTES

The Cirque has established several maintained trade routes between the primary commerce hubs of Arnesse. Though the list below is not comprehensive it covers the major routes commonly known throughout the Kingdom.

### **Dragon Road**

**Destinations:** Free City of Orn and Taliesin

**Length:** 850 Miles

**Safety:** Low

This is widely considered to be one of the most treacherous yet lucrative trade routes in all Arnesse. It runs eight hundred miles through desolate terrain and over half the route goes unmarked by any roads or signs. The trade route crosses the

boundless wastes of Tarkath from Taliesin, into Tor Amnon, then further South to Tor Oman where it turns Westward along the Scaled Road, through the sirat of Dokaal. Finally, the route leaves Tarkath as it passes beneath the massive Dragon Gate and stretches another two hundred miles across the barren badlands to the Free City of Orn. Natural hazards, weather, and bandits make this trip incredibly dangerous, but the wealth that can be acquired from successfully traversing this road lures many to make the attempt. Most lose their lives while doing so, but the Cirque has managed to establish a reliable caravan named the Crimson Cortege, which makes the journey between the two cities every cycle of the moon. It is named the Crimson Cortege because of the bright crimson flags and wagon covers that denote the caravan and make it easy to spot. While raids are common, especially along the Scaled Road, the Crimson Cortege is well guarded by a band of at least two hundred battle hardened Naga mercenaries, making any attempt at its cargo not without its own perils.

### **Ashen Road**

**Destinations:** Tyranthis and Taliesin

**Length:** 600 Miles

**Safety:** Low

The Ashen Road is the only trade route that runs within a single Protectorate and is one of the primary lifelines that keeps Tarkath supplied. The route begins in Tyranthis and instead of running directly across the wastes, it takes the River Emon to the city of Tor Emon. From there, it continues down the River Emon to the sirat of Nekros, near Dragonspire, and then turns northward across the wastes toward Tor Amnon. The route finishes its nearly six-hundred-mile journey on the long trek across the Field of Bones into Taliesin. Many of the goods that come out of Tarkath, bound for northern markets, are moved along the Ashen Road. Since much of this route is by river, it is safer than the Dragon Road. The last stretch across the wastes to Tor Amnon and Taliesin however, is still treacherous due to a lack of marked roads and the hostile environment. Bandits are infrequent, but there are occasional raiders, likely based out of either Serapis or Hagga, that will try to take a caravan, which necessitates a compliment of guards. This route is almost never trafficked by traders from the north but it is a sign of respect for non-Tarkathi to have made the journey.

### **Golden Road**

**Destinations:** Taliesin and King's Crossing

**Length:** 350 Miles

**Safety:** Medium

The Golden Road is a relatively new trading route and has been established within the last ten years since Lord Rylen Aragon took power in Taliesin. It makes the relatively short and level journey from Taliesin, on the borders of Tarkath, north to the bustling Corveaux city of King's Crossing, passing first through the village of Redwick and Sohten in the Midlands. This relatively easy and profitable route is one of the ways for a trader to make some quick coin and thus the route is often full of carts and wagons hauling all manner of goods both north and south. The route is fairly safe but has certainly become a target of bandits due to the amount of wealth that flows along the Aurean Road. The Corveaux do their best to keep it patrolled, but during the late hours of the night, traders are advised to stay off the road. One of the prevalent dangers of late is traders attacking one another. Given the proximity of caravans it has become popular among some unscrupulous merchants to waylay a rival's wagons and take their goods. These attacks are often lethal as the perpetrators don't want to leave witnesses alive.

### **Dusk Road**

**Destinations:** Ember and Scyld

**Length:** 850 Miles

**Safety:** Medium to Low

The Dusk Road is the long, desolate passage along the North Road toward the freeport of Scyld. It begins in the Richter forge-city of Ember and travels northwest, through the lands of House Varga, then within the shadow of the Shards of Acheron across the blasted Plains of Oubliesse as it climbs up into the Barrier Mountains. There, it continues northwest through the Morghyll Pass and into the fel town of Dresden, before descending into the long dark of the Dwimmerhold, passing beneath the Barrier Mountains and finally arriving at Scyld. While this road travels mostly through the lands of House Richter and was once considered to be safe, the shortages in the Protectorate of food and supplies have made caravans an increasing target for raiders and even Richter nobles. This is especially true in the west, where the lands of House Beil have been hit hardest by both famine and disease. Since this road leads to Scyld, it is well known as a smuggler's route. The locals often say that if you lose something in northern Arnesse, you can probably find it somewhere along the Dusk Road. Once, House Richter aggressively patrolled this road and looked for such nefarious

activity, but in the last few years that has fallen by the wayside as the house has made less and less distinction between stolen and legitimate goods.

### **Winter Road**

**Destinations:** Scrow and Grimfrost

**Length:** 700 Miles

**Safety:** Medium to Low

The Winter Road is also known by many as a lifeline to the north as it provides vital supplies from the south to the lands of House Hale in Everfrost. It begins in the Richter city of Ember and then travels north along the mighty Aurean Road, past the town of Darkhallow and Eisen, and then finally crossing into the Winter Vale, arriving at the fortress of Grimfrost. Though this road has traditionally been very safe, the often-tense relationship between House Hale and House Richter has been the cause of hefty taxes on caravans bound for Grimfrost. There are tales of Richter lords raiding caravans to take goods they feel were rightly owed to them because of raids from House Hale. A prospective merchant should also be aware that those very same raids which target House Richter, occasionally target caravans along the Winter Road. Given the tensions in the north between House Innis and House Richter, there are even rumors of Innis raiding parties making their way as far in as the Aurean Road in attempts to disrupt trade. Just in the last year, two caravans have been found riddled with arrows, and dead to the man. Despite the dangers and high taxes, this road is one of the most lucrative in Arnesse given that the markets of Grimfrost pay extremely well for the luxury or exotic goods of the south.

### **Merchant's Road**

**Destinations:** Highcourt and Free City of Orn

**Length:** 400 Miles

**Safety:** Medium

The Merchant's Road is one of two trade routes that brings goods out of the Free City of Orn and into the Kingdom of Arnesse. This relatively short and easy passage leads approximately four hundred miles up the Coast Road and crosses into the borders of the Sovereignlands near Caer Cadwyn, the ancestral home of House Bannon. This route is unique in the Kingdom in that is very lucrative, but also very exclusive. The Cirque's leadership in the Free City of Orn only sells a limited number of writs permitting use of the Merchant's Road. They are expensive, limited, and very hard to come by. The acquisition of such a writ is a rare and treasured thing, for it gives the merchant the ability to import

rare, exotic goods into one of the wealthiest cities in Arnesse – its capital of Highcourt. Also, the road is fairly safe, but the two hundred miles a caravan has to travel through Orn's territory can be somewhat treacherous as bandits and raiders still make their home in hideouts among the hills to the west. The Cirque is willing to provide protection for caravans for a price. Once one crosses into the Sovereignlands, the risk of attack is minimal as the Bannon lands around Caer Cadwyn, the fief known as Wolfhome, are some of the best patrolled and most secure lands in the Kingdom. Wolfhome is also well known as a popular vacation spot for Arnesse's wealthy during times of favorable weather. This fief features several open-air markets that are prime opportunities for merchants to make a healthy profit.

### **King's Road**

**Destinations:** Highcourt and King's Crossing

**Length:** 800 Miles

**Safety:** High

The King's Road is by far one of the safest trade routes in all of Arnesse. Starting in Highcourt in the West, it runs along the legendary Vermillion Road to the castle of Caddock Tor, through Mistdale, and onto Castle Dorston and Silverdale in the east. It finally passes through the mighty gates of Caer Stormholme along the Eastwatch and then covers a short distance across the Midlands to King's Crossing. This route is considered safe and easy, and unless a merchant takes bigger risks to attempt to take goods beyond King's Crossing, it is not as profitable as some others. Most traders will make the run along the Merchant's Road and the King's Road, from the Free City of Orn to King's Crossing, to increase their profits. Trade in this territory is also already well established and many coasters and trade companies already have stakes in importing and exporting to the Sovereignlands. Those who wish to change those existing arrangements will have to have friends in high places or an immense amount of coin. The people of the Sovereignlands are also reluctant to trust outsiders and much of their internal trade is handled by a single Cirque troupe known as the Royal Coaster, who retains its own mercenary guards - the Red Woven. The weather is also a major factor on this trade route. The Sovereignlands can often be rainy and this can turn even the best roads to a muddy mess, limiting travel by wagon. The River Ard runs the entire distance, controlled by a single troupe of Cirque called the Ferryman who charge exorbitant fees for non-members. During the Winter, deep snows are common and both the roads and the river are often blocked. Trade nearly comes to a halt through the Sovereignlands during the Winter season.

## **Green Road**

**Destinations:** King's Crossing and Orgonne

**Length:** 700 Miles

**Safety:** High

One of the most scenic and beautiful routes in the Kingdom is the Green Road, which stretches from King's Crossing in the West, all the way across the Midlands to the ancient city of Orgonne on the Eastern Coast. Along the way, it passes through the towns of Belburn and Kettering, along the River Kallea and the Gryphon River, past the Keep of the Ninewells, home of House Penrose, and then onto Orgonne. One can follow the Vermillion Road the entire way and parts of it can even be navigated by river. Most merchants are torn over which is the easiest route in the Kingdom, and many are hard pressed to disagree it is this one. Generally moderate weather, paved and well-guarded roads, and access to lucrative markets make this the first choice of many who are seeking to get into the business of commerce. But, as with all things, there is often a catch. The first is that the Corveaux are very particular about who they let trade along this route. The Ringmaster of King's Crossing, Otho the Raven, has a great deal of say over which caravans can frequent the Green Road and those who are friend to the Cirque are given preference. Second, the taxes are high to travel the road and it is considered among the costliest routes for a caravan to travel. Third, as with the Sovereignlands, there is very little room in the market for new movers and shakers without an individual knowing someone or having a lot of coin to buy your way in. The Corveaux are also extremely diligent in monitoring the merchants who use the road. Anyone caught smuggling, dealing with the black market, or involved in any sort of violation of the King's Laws is typically brought to judgment and even if not found guilty, often banned from the Green Road, the Dawn Road, and Golden Road – a blow that puts most merchants out of business.

## **Dawn Road**

**Destinations:** King's Crossing and Scrow

**Length:** 300 Miles

**Safety:** High

The Dawn Road leads along the Aurean Road, North out of King's Crossing and toward Scrow in the Hearthlands. It is one of the shorter, but more heavily regulated trade routes in the Kingdom and is also part of the primary vein of trade along the Aurean Road. As one travels toward the border of the Midlands, they would notice the road is heavily patrolled by outriders and knights of House Urqhart, a vassal of House Corveaux, who stop and search every caravan and person they

encounter. Those who refuse to be searched are usually attacked, beaten, and searched anyway. Those who resist are often put to the sword and their goods confiscated. House Urqhart claims it is looking for contraband entering or leaving the Midlands, but in truth are looking for serfs being smuggled into the lands of House Corveaux, hoping to earn freeman status. Once one crosses the border to the Hearthlands, though it is only one hundred miles, the road is diligently watched by brigands and thieves who lay in wait for weakly defended caravans or travelers they can rob. They have a habit of capturing those whom appear to be a likely ransom, leading many to conceal their finery or dress modestly. The Fervent Order of the Vellatora, for all its claim about defending the weak, neglects to guard the roads at all, leaving this "lesser duty" to the house troops of the Blayne nobles, who in many cases are more corrupt than the highwaymen. The Cirque in Scrow are also legendary for seeing that every merchant caravan that enters or passes through the city pays a heavy tax. It is said that when you enter Blayne lands as a merchant, you ought to carry two bags of coin. One to keep, and one to pay your way.

## **Woodland Road**

**Destinations:** Scrow and Lydiard

**Length:** 200 Miles

**Safety:** Medium

The Woodland Road leads out of Scrow and is one of the shortest trade routes in the Kingdom. Once beyond Scrow's walls, it runs along the Old Forest Road, across the border and into the lands of House Innis and stops at the town of Lydiard. This journey is fairly easy, and the Old Forest Road is well kept. While in the Hearthlands, there is a threat of lurking highwaymen who would seek to waylay the undefended, but once one enters the Thornwood, the woodwards and Knights of the Ivy who guard its borders ensure that no bandits ever cross over. It is not an uncommon site to see the severed heads of would-be bandits stuck on wooden poles along the Old Forest Road near the border of Innis lands. Lydiard is overseen by House Brevis, a vassal to House Innis, and has become a bit of a trade hub since no other trade is allowed deeper into the Thornwood without express permission of House Innis or an invitation from one of its vassals. Thus, the Old Forest Market of Lydiard, has developed into one of the finest in the entire region and has brought a great deal of wealth to the once small town. When a trader arrives in Lydiard they will often sell their goods directly to the market there and then leave again. A whole group of merchants work only out of the Old Forest Market, buying goods and then reselling them to the Innis representatives, who then transport

them deeper into the Thornwood in caravans of their own. On rare occasions, a merchant or trader is given exclusive permission to travel deeper into the Thornwood with their caravan or goods, usually under heavy guard from the troops of House Innis. It is said, however, that access to the Thornwood can be bought, for the right price.

### **Dark Passage**

**Port:** Scyld

**Destination:** Boundless Deep

**Safety:** Low

Scyld is a freeport claimed by House Rourke in the far Northwest of Arnesse. It is a lawless place that is a dark, undesirable destination for most crews. House Rourke enforces little in the way of laws here save their own personal code and the taverns along the dockside are full of roustabouts and salty sea dogs of the worst sort. Still, this port sees a wealth of goods and coin flow through it on any given day and the Rourkes welcome ships flying all banners to come and trade their wares. The market for smuggled and stolen goods is even larger than that of legitimate wares and Scyld is the top destination for any smuggler in the north who is looking to move their cargo. Few non-Rourke ships come to these waters without at least one warship as escort. Once the ships are in port, they are said to be under the protection of Lord Paragon Tybold Rourke, though this does not mean the crews of these ships can't get in a good amount of trouble when they go ashore to drink in one of the many taverns or partake of the pleasures found in one of Scyld's infamous brothels. Many legitimate sea captains refuse to go anywhere near the "cursed" waters of Scyld, but there are those who take the risk. As long as they don't pry too deeply into their origins, merchantmen and traders are able to purchase goods at a fraction of their normal prices.

### **Black Passage**

**Port:** Tyranthis

**Destination:** Soundless Sea

**Safety:** Low

While some may call Tyranthis a city, there are many who say that it is only a freeport disguised as one. Owned by House Vaith of the Aragons, the Vaiths are well known for their close ties to House Rourke. It is easy to look upon the gleaming spires and white stone and believe that this port is a safe-haven, but as one pulls closer and sees the ramshackle and run-down state of its streets and the general dockside chaos, it's clear that it may not be. Darkness lurks in the shadows of the ancient edifices of Old Tarkath and persons of ill repute flourish, plying their wiles upon the unsuspecting.

Taverns and brothels line the streets, catering to all manner of appetites. The truth of Tyranthis is that it is a city which pretends to be something benign to take advantage of those who cannot see it for what it is. Still, the wealth of Tarkath flows in and out of this port, so there is indeed legitimate coin to be made here. It is this fact alone that keeps many merchantmen visiting this port, despite the risks. Blackwatch Bay, the largest Rourke freeport in the South, lies barely a day's sail away and raiders are almost always lying in wait for merchantmen hulks who are sailing into and out of port. Lord Damon Vaith, the ruler of the city, claims to do his best to keep shipping lanes clear, but many feel he is simply passing information along to raiders on the best prizes to take.

### **Western Passage**

**Port:** Highcourt

**Destination:** Boundless Deep

**Safety:** High

The deep waters of the Bay of Thrantis are home to the second largest port in all Arnesse, Kingsport. Scores of ships come and go from Highcourt each day and easily two dozen or more lay at anchor in the bay. Many of these ships are bound for the Free City of Orn, while others are headed north to ports in the Dusklands or the Vale of Shadow. This is one of the safest ports in Arnesse and House Bannon's crimson-sailed war galleys are always present within the bay and patrol the waters north and south for a hundred miles or more. Fishing is also an incredibly lucrative and profitable trade and Kingsport is home to countless boats that make their living seeking the bounty of the sea. Even more fishing vessels come into the port from the smaller villages along the coast such as Falder's Kray. Highcourt is the largest city in Arnesse and is a truly cosmopolitan destination for crews who anchor in her harbor. The Bannons welcome all ships flying friendly flags but keep a careful list of those who come in and out of the bay. Those who are deemed unwelcome for whatever reason are either prohibited entry, detained and arrested, or simply destroyed, depending on the whims of the harbormaster. Kingsport also maintains the largest shipyards on the Western coast of Arnesse. Here, the Bannons continue to grow and maintain their naval forces, which are currently second only to House Rourke in strength and size.

### **Knight's Passage**

**Port:** Orgonne

**Destination:** Soundless Sea

**Safety:** Medium

Orgonne, also known as the City of the Sea, is the dominant port city in Eastern Arnesse. Sitting atop a cliff, the city has an impressive view its surroundings and ships can see this shining beacon from miles away. Below the cliffs sits the Low City, a second town that has grown up in the shadow of the cliffs above. It supports the docks as well as many of the city's markets and low-income districts, and is well patrolled by knights of the Vermillion Order who keep crime and violence to a minimum. Ruled by the Corveaux family of Suthwater, the city has experienced a resurgence of prosperity of late due to the diligent efforts of its ruler Lady Jeanne Corveaux. Despite her efforts, these waters can still be dangerous to travel as the Corveaux naval force is not as strong as that of their counterparts. The waters immediately around Orgonne are well patrolled by warships and other light interceptors, but further away from the city, raiders are known to lurk and prey upon those merchantmen who come to the area undefended. The city itself is not as cosmopolitan or large as others, housing only thirty thousand or so souls, but the immediate area around Orgonne is a popular vacation destination for many in the Midlands and beyond. Most ships that come here enjoy the warm waters and white-sand beaches, using it as a bit of a vacation themselves. Fishing is the top industry in the city and being as this is one of the few major warm-water ports in Arnesse, the abundance and quality of the seafood is renowned across the Kingdom.

### **PRICE LIST**

As part of the monopoly granted to the Cirque by the Artis Compact, the guild regulates and mandates prices on goods throughout the Kingdom. They do this via a centralized price list that is maintained by every local guildhall. The list extends to all raw and finished goods, and any specific services associated with trade or craft. For example, how much a Hexen charges for their services is not regulated by the Cirque but how much a smith charges to repair armor or a trader charges to transport goods, is covered. The prices are considered the minimum that can be charged for a good or service though merchants or tradesmen are always welcome to charge more. This is particularly true if there is a shortage of a particular item or good in an area. They are encouraged to do so as Privilege is based on the prices listed on the sheet. This sheet is typically maintained by the Golden Hall in the Free City of Orn and price lists are delivered by the

Emissaries of the Prophet to the major guildhalls every three to four moons.

Under the Artis Compact, the Cirque can mandate prices for any merchant or tradesmen, and even those not in the Cirque are entitled to be paid the listed amounts. Those who charge less are punishable under the King's Law yet will normally receive a visit from the Cirque long before that ever happens. Be it under pressure from fines and the law or the Cirque's troupers, every merchant or tradesmen eventually complies with the price list. The Cirque has even been known to visit those merchants or tradesmen in the employ of nobles and remind them of the lucrative opportunities that lie outside of working in their household. The most talented of these merchants or tradesmen are sometimes offered membership in the guild, sundering their existing relationship with the noble and abolishing any established oaths of fealty. This has led to no small amount of friction between the Cirque and the nobility, but it has also encouraged lords to be more generous with their retainers for fear that they will be poached by the guilds.

### **THE ARTS**

#### **TROUPER**

Troupers are members of the troupes who dedicate themselves to both the protection and administration of the local guildhall. While merchants and crafters have affairs which keep them busy, the troupers focus on ensuring that the guildhall runs smoothly and is well defended against external and internal threats. This can include tasks like managing the treasury, being a strategic leader, or helping to maintain logistics. Troupers are often specialists in combat and many are well-trained in martial arts. Most ducat grabbers come from the troupers and a large number of Ringmasters and other highly ranked Cirque are drawn from among their ranks.

#### **MERCHANT**

The merchants consist of those who focus most of their time on the sale or transport of goods. They are often seen running caravans from city to city, a job that can often take them far afield from their local guildhall. A surprising number of merchants don't call one guildhall their home but move between a number of them. This job allows for an incredible amount of freedom but is also very dangerous, as the roads and passages of Arnesse are often fraught with brigands and beasts alike. Those merchants who choose to remain in one location often oversee the incoming and outgoing caravans in

a guildhall's region. While leaders from the merchants are less common given their frequent movement, there is a greater chance they will be promoted to lead a caravan as a boss hostler, a respected and important position responsible for a considerable amount of assets.

## TRADESMEN

Tradesmen are those troupers who are primarily focused on the crafting and creation of goods and items. They are members of the Cirque who are typically the least involved with day-to-day affairs as they have their own business to run. Unlike merchants, they are rarely called from their forges or workshops, staying close to the area in which they make a living. For this reason, tradesmen who do have time to take away from their businesses are more likely to rise into the ranks of the Cirque administrative and leadership roles. A master crafter has a considerable amount of soft power and status among the Cirque as they hold personal skill in high regard. The guild considers them almost as voices of wisdom as most crafters are very thoughtful and meticulous and it is common that Cirque leaders consult tradesmen for counsel or advice.

## THE TROUPES OF THE CIRQUE

Though there are literally dozens of troupes within the Cirque both major and minor across Arnesse, some of the strongest and most well-known groups are listed below.

### JACKALS

The Jackals are the top troupe in the Cirque. They work out of the Free City of Orn and are led by the Prophet. All told, they number an estimated two thousand strong, many of whom are troupers well trained in combat. The Jackals are known to operate like their namesake and often scavenge the Free City and beyond for whatever might be abandoned or forgotten. This has led them to become perceived as junk hoarders, their operation built upon sifting through what they find for things of value. It's commonly known that they employ bedraggled street children to sift through what they find for a few coins a day.

The Jackals are known to be masters with exotic weapons such as spears, bolas, whips, and nets. They work as a group to take down foes and often fight in light armor so they can take advantage of their incredible maneuverability. All Jackal fighters are trained in acrobatics and use them to devastating

effect; to evade or pursue people on the winding, narrow streets of the Free City. The Jackals also have a bit of a reputation for not fighting fairly, especially in situations where they are plainly outmatched.

The highest-ranking members of the Jackals wear ceremonial headdresses that resemble their troupe sigil - a werejackal with an elaborate ceremonial headdress. All the Emissaries of the Prophet are drawn from the ranks of the Jackals and quite a few of the Nagas as well. In the Free City of Orn, being a Jackal is a mark of status and seeking membership in their guild is a common way that those of lower birth might ascend to make a name for themselves. The Jackals have few troupe codes, training and living in small groups who inevitably grow close to one another, much like a family. It is rare to see a Jackal outside of the Free City of Orn save when they are on a mission or escorting a Cirque member of rank.

### KRAITS

The Kraits are the troupe local to the city of Taliesin. Once, the Kraits were a Menagerie, but when Grandpa Hussan took leadership of the Lyceum guildhall, appointed to Ringmaster status by the Prophet, they became a troupe. The last ten years has been a growing experience for the Kraits and while their members have adjusted to a life outside the underworld, they are still among the most corrupt Cirque that anyone could encounter. They take their name from the deadly poisonous yet shy krait, which is known for its beautiful black banding. The guild is not very combat oriented, and it is fairly small, having only about five to seven hundred members spread across Taliesin and Tor Amnon. It has access to some of the finest poisons and poison-makers in Arnesse outside of the Apotheca and when necessary, it employs them to deadly effect against rivals and enemies.

The Kraits are known to wear garb befitting life in Tarkath though tend to favor some kind of black banding on their outfits, that, much like a poisonous snake, warns those who would confront them to stay away. They also are known for wearing an excessive amount of snake imagery and quite often keep snakes as personal pets. Unlike some other troupes, the Kraits don't often contribute to the community. They have some tradesmen and merchants, but by in large do little but collect the taxes on caravans and Privilege from local merchants and tradesmen. The economy is booming in Taliesin and they are happy to siphon off a bit of that coin for their own personal use. If one is looking for a Krait, they

often can find them patrolling in one of the Golden City's many drug dens, taverns, or brothels.

The fact that the Kraits do little more than extort the populace and use Taliesin as their personal playground has caught the attention of Lord Rylen Aragon and his Corveaux wife, Lady Emmeline. There are whispers that the Lord of Taliesin grows tired of these reports and has already confronted Grandpa Hussan about the need for the troupe to clean up their behavior. The Kraits have few personal codes other than the fact that they tend to be both highly competitive and often fight amongst themselves. It is not uncommon for a Krait leader to have literally poisoned their way into their position.

## TEN KNIVES

The Ten Knives are considered by many in the Cirque to be little more than a band of highwaymen, thugs, and ruffians. Under the command of their Ringmistress, Carmilla, the Bloody Bitch, they have held the streets of Old Town in their thrall for the better part of two decades. They are also the largest troupe in Arnesse, numbering at just over three thousand strong, most of which resides within Scrow. While there are a few merchants and craftsmen who are members, the Ten Knives prefer to extort the non-Cirque craftsmen and tradesmen for coin whenever they can. Despite this, a larger than average amount of merchants are members of the Knives as Scrow remains one of the top trade cities in the Kingdom.

The Ten Knives are masters of street and back-alley combat and all are well trained in the art of light, easily concealed weapons, particularly the dagger and the throwing knife. The Ten Knives tend to distinguish themselves by wearing red, in particular a red sash around the waist. The troupe is organized into smaller gangs that are led by Masters and assigned to different parts of the city. These individual gangs don't often get along, and are likewise encouraged by Carmilla to settle any disputes with raw violence. Within this city itself, the Ten Knives are both feared and respected among the people. Lord Paragon Blayne has stated that he prefers the locals police themselves and in the absence of house guards, the Ten Knives are the law and justice. This gives the troupe enough authority and legitimacy to almost have the run of Old Town. But even as the Ten Knives protect and help the lower class, they mercilessly abuse and extort them at every opportunity.

The culture of the Ten Knives is very focused around survival of the fittest and members regularly test each other in combat or other challenges to see who is the strongest or most

cunning. Those Knives who wish to ascend in rank usually do so via a series of challenges to prove they are worthy or to unseat the existing leader. It's also very common among the Ten Knives to run some kind of "side hustle" or business to make a little extra coin. Most of these businesses are illegal in nature and run the gamut from gambling to brothels, to petty thievery and forgery. Almost all disputes among the Ten Knives are resolved with the Ring of Blood but rarely is it to the death. Most members of the troupe would rather show their dominance over their opponent and then have them live with the shame of defeat than give them the mercy of death.

## LORDS

Considered by many to be the most orderly and disciplined of the troupes, the Lords are based out of Highcourt. Those who spend time among them often leave feeling more like they have spent time among a noble household than a Cirque troupe. Midnight Rose runs the Lords and she does so with an iron fist covered in a velvet glove. The Lords are one of the smaller troupes, numbering less than a thousand. While they have martial members among them, their troupers are not focused on combat, but administration and logistics. Highcourt is such a massive trade hub that the Lords spend a great deal of time keeping the wheels of commerce heavily greased. They also have a substantial number of merchants among them in addition to some of the finest artificers and craftsmen in the realm.

Being in such close proximity to the Grand Court has an effect on everyone who comes in contact with it and the Lords are no exception. They dress and act like the gentry and nobles with whom they so frequently interact, though not a single one of them, save Midnight Rose, is a highborn. While some nobles may look down on their regal name, the Cirque only derives satisfaction from their obvious displeasure. The structure of the troupe is very rigid, with higher ranks being given great deference and authority over those they oversee. Midnight Rose is the ultimate authority and prefers to keep the Lords busy by constantly inviting them to prove their worth. It is from those who do so that she selects her leaders. Success means promotion and failure means demotion. Spectacular failures are often rewarded by expulsion from the troupe and even the city. Given that increases in rank usually mean significant raises in wealth, competition among the Lords for rank and notice is high. Though it rarely goes this far, it's not unheard of for a particularly heated rivalry to turn lethal. The Lords are known to make lavish displays of wealth in their clothing and jewelry, but are most proud of the pets they keep and train. Exotic birds of prey, wolves, and even

big cats are kept by the guild. One Lord is even said to have a basilisk as a pet.

In addition to their own significant resources, the Lords have the backing of powerful allies within House Bannon. They also have connections built up with many of the members of the Grand Court and the King's Council, particularly the Lord Exchequer. Through these connections the Lords stay well informed on both the goings on in Highcourt and the rest of the Soverignlands. It is sad that for some time, Midnight Rose has had higher aspirations than to merely lead the Cirque in Highcourt. As the Prophet has become increasingly withdrawn in the last few years, she has reached out to the other Ringmasters in the hopes that they would back her as the new leader of the guild. Thus far she has been rebuffed but is said to have plans in the works backed by powerful, wealthy patrons who are willing to fund her expansion plans, with or without the cooperation of the other Ringmasters.

## IRON BLOODS

A newly risen power within the Richter city of Ember, the Ironbloods are led by the ruthless Ringmaster, Vinson the Groom. Upstarts though they may be, the Ironbloods have grown quickly by recruiting from the ranks of the people and absorbing several other large troupes of the Dusklands. As a result, they are approaching two thousand members, many of whom are troupers and combat-ready. This certainly makes the Ironbloods among the top Cirque military powers in Arnesse, along with the Jackals and the Ten Knives. Unlike many troupes, there are deep divisions within the Ironbloods. Since Vinson took power as Ringmaster a great many of the old guard have been held hostage to the current leadership.

Once, the troupes of Ember were almost exclusively focused on craftwork but now Vinson's new regime has them making weapons and armor for a war that is quickly closing on two fronts. The Ironbloods are in active conflict with the Ten Knives of Scrow and if the two ever cross paths, it is certain to come to blows. Vinson has also sworn to see the Lord Paragon of House Richter, Hawken Richter, unseated from power and risks bringing the wrath of a great house down on the Cirque. While some Ironbloods are eager to crack skulls and prove themselves, others are worried this might be the end of the Cirque in the Dusklands. Vinson feels confident in his chances and continues to recruit from the ever-increasing ranks of dissatisfied commonfolk who flock to the cities looking for aid and purpose. Rumors are spreading that Vinson has been working to get his hands on a larger number

of firearms and even canons from allies within House Richter. Were this to happen it could radically change the balance of power among the local Cirque and, given his distaste for the current Richter rulership, possibly even all the Dusklands.

The Ironbloods are easily identified as they almost always carry some manner of hammer. Their cruel calling card is not to kill, but cripple by breaking legs, arms, or hands. The latter is more often employed when a crafter is involved so that their livelihood is impacted, permanently. They also are known for wearing deep grey colors, usually with shades of crimson or wine as an accent. The Ironbloods may number less than other troupes but the average trouper is as well-equipped as a regular soldier in an army, giving them a massive edge in a fight. The Ironbloods have not been around long enough to develop their own customs but among them are practiced the arts of fire and flame. During the festival of Ember Fair in the Dusklands, the Cirque of Ember puts on a performance fit for a king, complete with fire dancers, fire spinners, fire eaters, and a full pyrotechnic display. The Cirque du Feu is a frequent visitor to Ember and has used Usher Hall as their base of operations.

## HIGH STREET KINGS

The High Street Kings are one of the newest troupes in the Cirque, having been established four years ago when the former Ringmaster of King's Crossing was found guilty of treason. Since then, Otho the Raven, the new Ringmaster, has risen to power and begun to rebuild a power base. While they are only a modestly sized troupe, numbering little more than a thousand, they have already made a significant impact on the local area. The High Street Kings are by far one of the most forthright and upstanding troupes in the Cirque. While none of them are knights, they do hold a high regard for the people and make a concerted effort to not only obey but enforce the King's Laws. This has made them heroes in the eyes of many commonfolk and well regarded by the Corveauxs. The troupe is identified by their dark blue clothing of a cloak and silver pin of a skull bearing a crown.

The High Street Kings are moving quickly to consolidate power but are still spread very thin. In the wake of the execution of the Sandman, the former Ringmaster of King's Crossing, Otho dismissed the Nagas from service claiming they were too corrupt. The High Street Kings have been struggling to fill their shoes ever since. Be it guarding the Cirque's holdings in King's Crossing or the many caravans that come in and out, they often have barely enough guards to keep them secure. More than once, Otho has had to ask the

Lord of King's Crossing, Garamond Corveaux for the aid of his knights. Much of the rest of the High Street Kings' time is dedicated to managing the many caravans that come and go from the massive trade hub of King's Crossing. They have a large number of merchants among them, as next to Scrow, King's Crossing is one of the largest spokes of commerce and trade in all of Arnesse.

The Cirque leaders of King's Crossing have a long history of manipulating the seen and unseen. Otho the Raven is one of the most informed individuals in the Kingdom, eliciting all manner of information through an extensive network of informants. Though this domain is normally reserved for the menageries, those who wish to pursue the arts of espionage could find few better teachers than the spies of King's Crossing. Otho's rapid rise to power has gained the attention of many. He has powerful friends among the Corveaux nobility and sits at the head of one of the most influential guildhalls in Arnesse.

## DEATH JESTERS

The Death Jesters are the least understood and most mysterious troupe in the Cirque. Residing in the remote port city of Scyld and led by the strange and enigmatic Mama Bones, they are less like a troupe and more akin to a death cult. Their numbers are shrouded in mystery but it's said they have between five hundred and a thousand members. Rumors abound that Mama Bones has even more troupers under her command, a veritable army that is hidden underground and waiting to strike the unwary. Many of the Jesters are troupers, though there are a fair mix of both merchants and even craftsmen among their ranks. They are perhaps the easiest troupe to spot as they are quite often dressed in black and white, macabre jesters and clowns with faces painted to look like death masks. Those that see a band of Death Jesters on the prowl are right to be terrified for they look like a band of walking dead out for blood.

The Death Jesters are easily the most sinister of the troupes and it is fortunate that they live in a place like Scyld where such things can be overlooked. Those who have interacted with the Jesters say that they seem to act erratically, calm at times and crazed at others. Sometimes they stare for long periods of time into the distance as if looking at something that is not there while others are voraciously focused on a task to the point of ignoring all else. In most civilized areas they quickly find themselves locked up or driven out of the area. There are all manner of wild tales about the Death Jesters -

everything from being possessed by spirits, to the troupe allegedly only recruiting from among the insane. The truth is much darker.

While it is not shared with the public, all the Death Jesters consider themselves reborn into the service of the Cirque. Each of them comes to Mama Bones in their own course, some because they have nothing left in the world of the living and others who merely want to forget. They are taken deep into the crypts beneath Scyld and there imbibe a potion that brings the "little death" upon them. They are then sealed in a sarcophagus with a heavy stone lid and upon awakening, must push the stone lid aside to free themselves. Those that fail to lift the lid are forever sealed within. Those that emerge from the crypt are reborn and accepted into the guild.

From that point on, they belong to Mama Bones and do her bidding without question or hesitation. Every week the Death Jesters gather for a communion and partake of the "Mother's Milk," a concoction of drugs that dulls their senses and strengthens their loyalty to Mama Bones. What Mama Bones plans to do with this crew of unerringly loyal minions is unclear, but it is known that she searches for something. Many Ringmasters fear that she may in fact find what she's looking for. To date, fear of what Mama might do should they try and oust her from the guild has held them powerless.

## THE CARNIVALS

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### THE SHADOW MASQUERADE

The Shadow Masquerade is one of the many carnivals which travels around Arnesse during the high season that brings with it the favorable climes of the year. They typically are seen in and around the area of the Midlands, Sovereignlands, and occasionally north into the Hearthlands or southern Dusklands. This carnival is shrouded in mystery and only ever puts on shows at night. During the day, the tents are shut up tight and guarded by Nagas. It is called a Masquerade and all performers wear elaborate masks that conceal their identities. Patrons are also encouraged to do the same, often making its guests a mystery as well. Many of their shows feature elaborate and death-defying stunts, many of which seem nigh impossible feats of acrobatics. Quite a few stunts are performed behind a curtain so that only the silhouette of the performer can be seen. They are also known for doing a great deal of work with lights, manipulating them in a way that creates strange and mysterious optical illusions. Magic, or at least the appearance of such, is also a big part of this show, with objects regularly appearing and disappearing, and other

mind-bending tricks that have the audience questioning what is real and what isn't. Much speculation has been made about the nature of this carnival, including theories as wild as the performers are actually bloodthirsty vampires and that they actually employ real magic in their shows. The show only runs for two nights and by the third morning, the tents and wagons have all but vanished, only to reappear at some more distant city or town for the next night's showing.

## CIRQUE DU FEU

The Cirque du Feu was born in Ember, the City of Forges roughly a century ago and is a spectacle unlike any seen in Arnesse. This carnival specializes in fire and pyrotechnics, a rare and dangerous performance art that has claimed its fair share of performers over the years. It travels around all year long, moving through most of the cities and towns along the major roads of Arnesse. The performance itself features fire-eating, fire dancing, flame tricks, and pyrotechnic displays. There are even animals involved in some of the stunts, as large cats leap through flaming hoops and riders jump horses over burning obstacles. A clown troupe named the Burner Boys appears to the delight of the audience with tricks and jokes. The carnival is best known for a stunt known as the Dragon's Fire, in which a performer is placed inside a canon and shot out amidst a blaze of flame and sparks. In addition to the show, there are shops with sweets and other carnival food as well as games that can be played for prizes. The current Ringmaster of the show is Cinder, a burly hulk of a man who's been the head of the show for well over a decade. The Cirque du Feu is one of the most popular attractions in Arnesse and draws huge crowds in any area it decides to stop.

## HOUSE RELATIONSHIPS

The Age of Kings has marked a new era for Arnesse. Each great house struggles to maintain its power and legitimacy through navigating the mazes of power. This process has led many to form unlikely alliances with old enemies and make new and bitter enemies where before there were none. The following details the current state of each relationship as they correspond to this faction. This information is to be taken as in-play by you and other members of this faction.

### HOUSE RICHTER

House Richter has proven to be a fair to middling customer over the years. Given their heavy industry and history of crafting excellence, the Dusklans in general has proven to be a market that can run hot and cold. Since the eruption of the Shardmount destroyed vast swaths of their countryside twenty

years ago, the Richters have been voracious consumers of basic goods – food, wood, and other unfinished products. But their infrastructure has failed to right itself since the catastrophe and today parts of the Dusklans are descending into so much desperation and chaos that doing business there is a risky. The Cirque has had to assign more Nagas to guard the caravans for fear of troops from noble houses and commonfolk raiding them. This, combined with the friction between the Ember guildhall and the Lord Paragon, have made Cirque relations with the Richters touch and go at best.

After an attack by a Richter noble on a caravan on the Winter Road in reprisal for a House Hale raid on his lands, some of the Ringmaster are calling to halt shipments to the Dusklans until the Richters can guarantee the safety of its shipments. There are also reliable rumors that Vinson the Groom is seeking another option for the Cirque's future there. There are rumors that some of the Lord Paragon's vassals are growing restless with the state of the Dusklans. If these parties are truly desiring to do something about their feelings, the Cirque would certainly have much to gain by backing them in their attempt to resolve the issue. The Richters are seeking to buy goods wherever they can and this makes them reliable customers, but their ability to pay has been in doubt and the uncertain state of their protectorate makes them risky to do business with. Still, the Richters have some of the finest metalwork and crafted goods in the Kingdom and their firearms sell for their weight in gold. If the Cirque were able to acquire some Richter firearms it would be a huge boon.

### HOUSE INNIS

The Innis represent a boundless opportunity for the Cirque that has yet to be realized. The Thornwood holds all manner of treasures and any merchant that was able to open that market and get exclusive access would make a fortune. Not even taking into account the rare herbs and bounty of their fields, the supplies of high end wood found nowhere else in Arnesse alone would make the adventure worth it. For now, the Cirque has been limited to dealings with Lydiard and restricted access to the fiefs of Innis and its vassals. But the Innis have increasingly sought to bring themselves out of their forests and join the world. And if the Innis wish to be a world power once again, they will have to open up their land trade and commerce. This means that the Cirque has a rare chance to convince them to change their mind on trade agreements. The Innis are also facing down a conflict with a much better equipped House Richter and all Cirque know that conflicts are good for business. It may be easy to convince an Innis lord or lady to bend a friendly ear to a merchant who was offering goods to keep them well supplied against their enemies. But

the Innis are none to be trifled with. More than one Cirque caravan has met it's end at the hand of their archers and even on a good day they tend to be a reclusive and prickly people. Still, a truly adventurous Cirque may attempt to open talks with them and find out what they needed. The process to building trust with them may be a long one, but they could become a powerful, unexpected ally if handled carefully.

### HOUSE ROURKE

The Cirque genuinely don't get along with very few groups. House Rourke is the exception to this. No power in Arnesse has suffered more than the Cirque at the hands of the Rourkes. This may just reflect the fact that the Cirque has the most merchant vessels on the seas, but the Sea Lords mercilessly target their ships because they know they are laden with goods. This has forced the Cirque to employ several warships that help it guard the most valuable caravans, but increasingly it has started to work with Aragon shipwrights to make even faster and more maneuverable ships than the typical cogs, carracks, and hulks. The new merchantmen they are building can make 6-8 knots in good wind, which means they can outrun most of the older ships in Arnesse, can carry more cargo, and are armed with canons. But the state of affairs with the Rourkes has endured for centuries and by now the Cirque expects to write off an amount of loss to piracy each year.

The Cirque has tried many times to parlay with the Rourkes and while they always reach some kind of 'understanding' it is barely a matter of months before a merchantman is raided by a ship bearing the colors of the Sea Lords. In addition to being thieves of the highest order, the Rourkes are also legendary for not holding to their word unless it suits them. The Rourke family has no land to speak of and most resources they own are 'borrowed' or stolen from someone else. All of these factors combine to make the Rourkes an insanely risky and dangerous business partner. Unless they are purchasing something that is for sale, the Rourkes should be the last party that a smart member of the Cirque considers doing business with. Only the Menagerie interacts with them on a regular basis as they are both active in the underworld of Arnesse.

### HOUSE CORVEAUX

House Corveaux represents the most stable and profitable market for the Cirque. The Midlands are bountiful and supply food and goods to all corners of Arnesse. The Cirque is more active in the lands of the Corveaux than any other domain in Arnesse. Be it shipping out of the port at Orgonne or the massive hub of trade at King's Crossing, the Vemillion Road is well traveled by Cirque caravans during all times of the

year. Helping this is the fact that the Corveaux support the efforts and generally work to keep their lands free of banditry and lawlessness. This means that the Cirque must devote less Nagas to help guard caravans and the losses each year to thievery in the Midlands is always low. This would seem like a perfect partnership other than the fact that the Corveaux and their vassals have a long history of idealism and general adherence to the law. The Cirque, which often engages in morally questionable and illegal activity, proceeds carefully, lest those activities come to the notice of the Midlands nobles.

For the Corveaux's benefit, the Cirque has largely kept itself clean of any legal entanglements and avoids running active Black Market operations in the Midlands. It understands should the full extent of the Cirque's activities come to light, it could spell disaster for their operations in the Midlands. Thus, they have done all they can to reassure the Midlands nobles that their operations are all legal. Otho the Raven, the Ringmaster in King's Crossing has done much to build a friendship with the Corveaux family, even going so far as to eject the Nagas from King's Crossing. Though the Nagas still escort some caravans through the Midlands, this gesture has done much to reassure the Midland nobles of the Cirque's good intent. A wise member of the Cirque understands who the Corveaux are. They can be some of the best business partners, but unless one is willing to uphold a virtuous and lawful life, they should proceed carefully, for not even the strongest of friendship or alliance will deter a Corveaux from doing the right thing. The Corveaux also historically have little love for the upstart House Blayne or the Aurorym faith, a fact that could prove useful if one sought a sympathetic ear.

### HOUSE BLAYNE

House Blayne is the newest among the great houses and controls the city of Scrow, the central hub of trade in all Arnesse. Perhaps they were truly blessed by their religion to be granted such a boon, for they have done little to earn it. The Cirque deals with House Blayne because it must but has little love for them. The Blaynes are not good investments, plain and simple. They are generally poor with managing their affairs and have struggled in the decade since they were given their Protectorate. Instead of building vital infrastructure necessary for prosperity, they have squandered their wealth on military spending to expand their armies. Meanwhile, they heavily tax all caravans that travel the roads and then do little to keep those roads safe, leaving travelers to be victimized by bandits or worse. However, the Hearthlands protectorate is centrally located and all trade going to the North must pass through it. The Cirque has made arrangements with House Blayne to ensure economic viability, but many of them are

suspect and potentially even illegal. Lord Paragon Frederick Blayne is not a moral man and he's found a powerful ally in his sister-in-law, Carmilla, Ringmaster of Scrow. Carmilla has been assigned by the Cirque to keep an eye on Frederick's operations in Scrow and the surrounding cities and thus far she has been able to help keep things largely under control.

But the Cirque mission in the Hearthlands is slowly failing. Instead of attempting to improve the situation there, many Cirque have themselves been tainted by their environment and are as guilty of the same extortion and corrupt practices as the local nobility. An additional concern is the rising power of the Aurorym. Long have the Cirque been warned about the threats of this upstart religion and the Hearthlands are its home. The Cirque's presence in Scrow allows them to keep a close eye on the faith, but it also potentially puts them at risk were the Aurorym to discover some of the Cirque's activities, especially its Black Market dealings. Fortunately, the faith is so focused on their expansion that they have largely neglected to keep a close eye on their own homeland. While the Cirque has no specific plan of action at the moment, they are positioning themselves in such a way that if a change needed to be made, they could be in a position to make that happen.

#### HOUSE HALE

Like the forest of Thornwood, the Everfrost represents a vast, undiscovered market for the Cirque. The hostile environment and unfriendly residents have made it difficult for caravans and merchants to push past the Winter Vale but the market at Grimfrost fortress has been lucrative for those who are willing to make the long journey North. The Everfrost is a barren and desolate tundra that is blasted by snow and ice most of the year. This has made House Hale a massive consumer of goods from the South and any merchant who arrives with goods to sell, especially during the Winter, is sure to make a healthy profit. Of all the Houses though, the Cirque have the least investment in the Hales. They produce very little in the North which means they are not the wealthiest house. Instead the Hales have focused much of their energy on warfare; a good bit of trade the Cirque does with the Hales is in weapons and armor. The Hales do have mines in the North that extract iron and other rare metals that they occasionally offer for trade, but beyond furs, there is not much of value to be acquired.

Still, some Cirque believe that treasures lie undiscovered within the icy wastes of Everfrost and expeditions beyond the Winter Vale by enterprising Cirque happen from time to time. While some Cirque see potential there, the reality is that the Hales are a people used to living with very little and they are not a trading culture. The Hales are known for taking what

they want, when they want, and making due with what they have. Despite this, some merchants have found good success with exotic goods from the South among a few of wealthy nobles of Everfrost, but the cost and danger of transporting these goods that far North is high. A wise member of the Cirque understands that the Hales and their vassals may not be overly concerned with the business of trade and commerce, but that they can be good customers like any other. The Northmen are well known for keeping their oaths at all costs. If one does strike a deal, they should secure it with an oath bond, for it will be a promise that will likely never be broken.

#### HOUSE BANNON

House Bannon has been a reliable customer of the Cirque for centuries. So reliable, that the Bannons have turned much of their trade and commerce over to the Cirque to run. The Sovereignlands produce some of the finest craftworks in the Kingdom, so the export of finished goods is a lucrative and profitable venture. The Cirque has a strong presence in Bannon lands and there are guildhalls in nearly every major town in Kingswood. In many ways, the Cirque's partnership with the Bannons is stronger than with House Aragon, but the guild makes far more coin from deals with the Tarkathi. While the Sovereignlands exports valuable commodities like wood and metals, its farmland is sparse and during the Winter many of the roads are all but impassable. This is further compounded by the fact that many of the residents of the Sovereignlands do not welcome strangers to their lands and they do not host local markets save in a few of the largest towns. This has forced the Cirque to create a special caravan known as the Royal Coaster, which travels from hamlet to hamlet, picking up goods and bringing them to trade hubs.

Most of the coin the guild makes in the Sovereignlands is out of the port at Highcourt where they move massive amounts of goods in and out of the city to feed its ravenous appetites. The Cirque is willing to go through many of these hoops and give the Bannons preferential treatment because they know that being kindly regarded by the family of the King is a sure way to stay free of royal entanglements. The Cirque know the Bannons are always good for the money and that they will keep their word. What has them worried lately is the fact that King Giles II has increasingly become focused on matters of morality and there is genuine concern among the Ringmasters of the Kingdom that it is only a matter of time before His Majesty's long gaze turns to regard the Cirque's practices. The Bannons are powerful, wealthy, and generally honorable in any bargain the benefits the. This makes the House of Kings a good partner and ally to have, but any wise guild

member should avoid exposing any potential indiscretions.

### HOUSE ARAGON

Though they have had long and often conflicting history with House Aragon, the Cirque recognizes good business. Tarkath is the top provider of exotic and rare goods for the wealthy of Arnesse and the Cirque is more than happy to supply caravans to move those goods out of the South. Given that the Aragons and their vassals are almost always in need of basic supplies that are commonplace in other markets, the Cirque can often trade low cost goods from the North for high value goods from the South. Though the journey through Tarkath is treacherous and difficult, the Cirque is willing to hire the necessary guides to ensure shipments get through safely and with a strong compliment of Nagas, the caravans are rarely lost. A good relationship with House Aragon also ensures a strong trading and business partnership with their ally, the largest commercial power in Arnesse, the Free City of Orn.

The Aragons are also the top suppliers of apothecary goods, including poisons and drugs in Arnesse, and while the troupes don't trade in these items, the menageries are extremely interested in them. House Aragon is also willing to flagrantly disregard the King's Laws, especially within their borders, so it makes the acquisition of illegal goods easy in the South. The only challenge becomes transporting them, but the smuggling of illicit goods is something the Black Market has become very good at over the centuries. In addition, the port of Tyranthis is more than happy to purchase goods with no questions asked at a reasonable rate, which makes it an ideal place for turning stolen cargo into fast coin. Once goods enter Tarkath, it's as if they never existed. The Cirque knows the Aragons are good customers, who pay on time, and hold to their deals. A wise member of the guild would find a way to quickly find some level of business relationship with them.

### THE APOTHECA

As the primary supplier of apothecary goods in the Kingdom, the Apotheca is one of the Cirque's larger business partners. Many years ago, as part of the Artis Compact, the Cirque agreed with the Apotheca to allow them to have exclusive production rights to those goods as well as regulate their production. In exchange, the Cirque was able to work with the Apotheca to set and mandate prices on apothecary. The Cirque's involvement with the decoction and elixir production is minimal but the Apotheca does often sell its finished goods to the Cirque so they can move them into the marketplace. Few Magisters go out and sell their wares at market as they have better things to do most of the time. The Cirque in general has good relations with the Apotheca as the Magisters

are known to be fair and logical. Beyond the production of apothecary goods, the two factions have very little in common and don't interact often. A wise member of the Cirque would treat a Magister as a reasonable business partner and ensure that they have an arrangement to acquire some of their valuable mixtures. Magisters are also brokers of secrets and keepers of hidden lore. For the right price, it is said that almost anything can be revealed. This fact alone has made the Apotheca a frequent partner with the Menagerie spymasters.

### THE FAYNE MOIRAI

Secretive, mysterious, and powerful, the Sisters are a group that one does not deal with unless it is absolutely necessary. Fortunately, of all the guilds, the Cirque has very limited contact with the Fayne as they don't run in the same circles. Most members of the Cirque have very little interest in the Sisters as they aren't an organization which deals in trade or commerce and don't often buy from the markets. In many ways, they represent the very noble power structure that many of the Cirque oppose. The Cirque have observed that they are very influential in the courts of Arnesse and thus they can be powerful but dangerous allies. A wise member of the Cirque would carefully watch the Fayne and try to stay out of their way unless there was some clear, substantial gain in dealing with one. Coming to their attention can have no good end for it is said they can see the unseen and even predict the future. The Cirque keep and traffic in many secrets that are better off hidden. The reward would have to be great indeed for a guild member to risk having them revealed by a Sister's visions.

### THE HEXEN

The Hexen are a small, specialized group of mercenaries that are barely an organization let alone a power in the world of Arnesse. Their trade is in dealing with creatures of the dark and while the Cirque has at times had to hire one to help protect a caravan in a particularly dangerous area, it is rare these two groups cross paths. Most Cirque have likely never encountered one of these creatures so there is a belief among some that these travelling warriors are charlatans who sell their services after putting on a performance to convince uneducated locals that an unnatural beast is about. Still, in the last five years, the Cirque has noticed a sharp rise in the number of incidents involving these alleged monsters. More than one caravan has been lost under strange and mysterious circumstances and the Ringmasters in the Hearthlands and Dusklands have considered the reality that they may have to put Hexen on retainer to guard their caravans in the unlikely, but possible, chance that one of these attacks occurs. A wise Cirque would know the uses of the Hexen and appropriate their services as they are needed. They would be cautious to not buy into the tall tales these fear merchants peddle as the

very same tales are the source of the peddler's livelihood.

### THE AURORYM

Ever since the Golden Fortunes warned of the Aurorym the Cirque have been skeptical of the faith. This has been further compounded by the fact that the core tenants of the religion 4 Law are an incredible strain on the organization. In addition, the Aurorym share many of the Cirque's perspectives about nobility and the abuse of power, making it ideologically attractive as well.

It goes without saying that the Underlords of the Menagerie oppose these ideas and the fact that some of the Cirque are even considering them is pushing the guild closer and closer to a potential conflict. Recently the guildhall in Hearthlands town of River's End came out and said that its members have decided to convert to the Aurorym faith. This has caused quite a stir and some feel that if more guildhalls convert, that a conflict may be unavoidable. As it is unlikely the guild will pass a mandate on conversion, each guild member is going to have to confront how they feel about the faith in the near future. The Cirque also know that they are not the only guild or faction that is facing this kind of choice and many fear the broader ideological conflict may spark war in the Kingdom.

### PLAYING A TROUPER

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Here's some guidelines for playing a Cirque member in a troupe. Please lean into some of these, even if your character diverges greatly from the average.

Members of the Cirque are generally a diverse, eccentric, and talented lot. They come from all regions but are drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the lower castes of society. While there are several exceptional cases of highborn who have found their way into the Cirque's ranks, they all have exceptional stories of how they earned the guild's trust. The Cirque is more than just a guild for its members, it is a family and their home. Given the opportunities it provides, there are many who want to join their ranks. As a result, the Cirque is very exclusive and careful about who it invites to join. Many Cirque are recruited from troubled backgrounds, or likewise rescued from unfortunate or dangerous situations by the guild.

The Cirque prefers to bring in members when they are young and easily trained but will take older recruits, especially if they are exceptionally talented. Once it sets its eye on a recruit, money is rarely an object and few obstacles will stand in their way. The Cirque has been known to buy out Serf contracts, rescue prisoners from jail, and even bribe nobles or

officials into releasing someone to their custody. The reason the Cirque is willing to fight so hard and pay so much is twofold. The first is because most of the Cirque believe in the power of redemption and want to fight against oppression and tyranny by the nobles. The second is because it sees some exceptional ability or talent in the person. That can be exceptional ability in a craft or trade, strong leadership potential, or some other gift or talent that makes them unique. One thing is for certain, once the Cirque buys your freedom, your life belongs to them and you are forever after a Cirky.

The Cirque community is strong and their bonds to each other are even stronger. While many Cirque are outgoing and even gregarious toward outsiders, they rarely trust those not in the guild enough to bring them truly into their circle. Given that many come into the guild with few or underdeveloped skills, the Cirque has had to develop a robust training program. The Cirque has one of the strongest mentoring and teaching programs in all of the Kingdom. Apprentices begin as a dull blade are honed into a fine edge with enough time and pressure. Recruits and members are free to choose their path and focus in the guild, be it crafting, merchanting, administration, or even martial combat. The Cirque encourages focusing in a discipline to gain mastery over it and responsibility is given to those who are best fit for the job. While nepotism does exist within the guild, those are often exceptional situations.

As an organization, the Cirque has strong feelings about the social structure of the Kingdom. While they mostly keep their feelings mostly to themselves, few in Arnesse seek equality and fair treatment of commonfolk more than the Cirque. They learned long ago that the way to accomplish their goal was not to revolt but to work to change the system from a position of strength. The Cirque work actively and tirelessly on behalf of the people. Sadly, the lure of wealth and power can corrupt even the most noble of virtues and over time, many members of the guild have forgotten or abandoned this purpose. Whereas once the Cirque was unified in its mission, it is now fractured and the concept of the guild family now generally extends only to one's troupe and rival troupes end up fighting each other for territory or wealth more than for the good of the commonfolk. Still, the Cirque hold no love for the nobility, especially those who oppress the people for their own gain. Those nobles find their caravans don't arrive on time if at all, their prices for goods are just a little bit more expensive or getting their hands on something they want is more difficult.

In most cases the Cirque are not quick to deal with issues. They have gained an immense amount of power and wealth and they are not about to risk it all by being careless. It would take so little for their entire house of cards to come tumbling down. As a result, the Cirque tend to keep to themselves and stay clear of politics, content to focus on their own businesses and local affairs. Those that do get involved make it a point to become well informed, using their businesses to build up networks of informants so they can decide what warrants their attention. When they feel it necessary, particularly to protect their own interests, the Cirque will act. Sometimes it is with bribes, other times favors, and occasionally with violence. If something needs to be dealt with permanently, the Cirque will often enlist the Menagerie to do the dirty work, but they are not afraid to take matters into their own hands when necessary.

While this policy of general neutrality and non-interference has served the Cirque well so far, things are evolving rapidly in the political landscape of Arnesse. Or perhaps devolving. The time may come in the near future when the Cirque will have to come to a decision. Remain a neutral power in the Kingdom or break from its traditions and take a stand for what it believes in. Many in the Cirque are concerned that the guild has become so divided that, should that day ever come for it to take a stand as a single guild, that individual troupes will turn on each other before it ever has the chance. They will destroy what has taken almost three centuries to build.