

## The Burning Pit

Six-hundred and sixty-six awful layers wind their way from the top of the Burning Pit to the bottom. The whole thing is about one hundred times deeper than it is wide and it is several thousand leagues down into solid bedrock. Superheated stone flows through cracks in the walls and aqueducts are periodically created to redirect their flow away from the inhabited regions. There is no day or night or weeks in the Burning Pit. There is no sun or light, aside from the glow of magma and the biothaumaturgical radiance of various abyss-dwellers. Time is measured by other means. Every seventeen hours, the earthquake Xaphan strikes the Pit, from the bottom up. Xaphan does not affect Soul-Merchants in good standing or their Estates, but you can hear it shudder from the Lake of Fire at the bottom of the Pit to the Cells of the Fallen at the top. Every sixty seven arrivals of Xaphan (fourty-seven and a half days) is followed thereafter by the Belching Conflagrations which issue from the Lake of Fire. These immense balls of flame rise from the Lake of Fire when it burns through the bedrock into a pocket of fuel. This sends a cloud of combusting gas hurdling upwards through the Pit, spitting liquid fire as rain would fall in other worlds. Higher positions in the Pit are prizes to be won, therefore, as they avoid the heat and pressure of the Lake of Fire. The Belching Conflagrations lessen in danger and effect as one rises in the Pit. The lowest levels of the Pit are reserved for Imps, although they have broken free and now plague the upper levels. Above them are the layers inhabited by Fiends, murderous demons without mind or purpose. The middle layers are lined with the charnel-palaces of the Soul-Merchants. The upper levels are uninhabited, forbidden by the Fallen. Legends, only, speak of their contents. The highest levels, looking out into a lightless sky, are haunted by the Fallen themselves. In total, the world is itself a chasm filled with only those things which hurt, harm, and curse.

The Fallen watch over the Soul-Merchants, an alien and cruel race. The Soul-Merchants in turn watch over what little of they Pit they are permitted to dwell in. They are lords of glorious, but horrid, domains made of various substances and texture. There was once not so much gore in the Burning Pit, but the remains of tortured souls are left only as bones and clots. They are ectoplasm, visceral to be sure but made of spirit stuff and incorruptible in a sense. Often, remains are collected in superheated calderas until they become tar pits. The stuff is inflammable, incredibly sticky, and capable of holding much more heat than you would immediately suspect. Their smells are unique. There are also hosts of terrible vermin, masturbated into existence by Imps. These horrid things are often combinations of lizards, locusts, and tiny, hateful men. Each one is unique in its awfulness. Soul-Merchants often take forms in the Pit that are immune to parasitism or are so hostile that they kill freeloaders outright. Those Soul-Merchants who make themselves out of arsenic have nothing to fear from such things, for instance. The sounds that issue forth from the Estates of the Soul-Merchants are themselves a form of torture. Soul-Merchants provide a product whose properties are distilled according the various tortures applied to a subject. They consider themselves craftsmen of a sort. So to say that their ministrations are terrible does not quite do the situation justice. Their victim's cries for mercy are merely the manifestations of a master at work. It is true, although no Soul-Merchant would ever admit it, that at least once every millennia, the sound of a scream really does bother them. What choice do they have, though? The Fallen demand their draughts of the Nectars of Suffering.

## History of the Bad Place

### The War of the Absolutes

The nature of good and evil is an impossible quandary, debated by scholar and ignoramus alike. One often finds 'good' as being defined mostly by what it is not. It is not murdering. It is not depriving. It is not suffering. Sure, we could say that 'good' is being heroic or ethical, but

ultimately, 'goodness' is a state of being mostly defined by the absence of 'badness'. Bad, on the other hand, is definite. You know it when you see it. However, 'badness' can often be very difficult to perceive especially when hidden away deliberately. If one has become accustomed to committing acts of 'badness', one becomes completely blind to that particular evil. Badness can also be amoral, like pain. The essence of 'the bad' (the painful, the negative, the evil) has a kind of magic. It is true that this debate once played out, in a very real sense, in a primeval world which existed a very, very long time ago. A world sprung up in the ether as a battle set-piece for the conflict between a personified simple perfect good and a complex primal evil. Goodness created champions and evil turned them against their maker. The results of this mythic struggle resulted in a burning crater, spanning thousands of leagues into a bedrock, created, one assumes, to be the geographic manifestation of this great evil; an empty space, filled with things hostile to life and happiness. Naturally, the two sides contested one another. Evil's superior complexity allowed it to overwhelm the simple goodness.

We shall endeavor to speak very little about goodness in the future. It was broken and cast into the earth so forcefully that it created the aforementioned crater. Its lifeless essence smoldered as a lake of fire at the bottom of this pit. The rock of the crevasse was itself set aflame. The Great Primal Evil, as we shall call the victor of the struggle, spent an incalculably long time tormenting his rival's children. For the crime of defending themselves against it, the Evil turned them into vessels of infinite suffering. It vomited forth liquid sin which it belched directly into the gullets of its captives. This concoction twisted their forms horribly and warped their sense of being. When the Evil was bored with its snuff games, it cast them into the Burning Pit, setting traps and enchantments within the spiral of the Pit to corrupt his victims for all time. The captives were called 'the Fallen', for they had once been champions of goodness. The Great Primal Evil was filled with ennui, though. It was not fulfilled by such a sad little place so it clawed its way into the beyond. It left forever after to spread its particular brand of magic to every corner of the universe. The Great Primal Evil's fate is unknown, but it is said to have touched every world which has played host to the Infernal Diaspora. Indeed, it is said that Soul-Merchants can only ply their trade in the footsteps of the Great Primal Evil.

The Fallen crawled blindly in the abyss of flame for an eon. So tortured were they, that when they encountered each other, they sought only to debase themselves in the embrace of their fellow sufferer. They performed horrid, self-polluting acts upon each other in an attempt to pretend that they were not aware of their own filthiness. Their unions became their nightmares, as their flesh birthed forth terrible Imps from their cankerous sores. These creatures were like fleas unto the Fallen; a parasite that dug deep into their gut where the fire had not yet burned. The Imps imitated the Fallen and humiliated themselves in the liquid fire. They cannibalized one another, for no reason at all, for Imps have no need for food. The Imps gibbered nonsense, but the only language able to be spoken by the Fallen was the hateful slurs of the Great Primal Evil. This language came to be known as the Old Tongue, whose words are unpronounceable to mortals and whose characters themselves carry curses.

Eventually, a faction of the Fallen killed one of their kind and used the body to escape the torments of the Lake of Fire. Stained in the blood of their kin, they discovered a spiral that spun around the pit six-hundred and sixty-six times. In the coils of the spiral they found uninhabited palaces, forbidden gardens, and artifacts whose mere existence were a malady to all thinking things. The ascent of the Fallen is the stuff of Soul-Merchant folklore, but suffice to say that they discovered they could not leave the Burning Pit proper. When they reached out of the Pit itself, they turned instantly to dust. The Fallen were imprisoned forever in their hellish orchards and molten throne rooms.

## **Demonic Forms Diversify**

When Imps attempted to leave the Lake of Fire, the Fallen smote them terribly. However, they watched over the Imps out of boredom. A game emerged, pitting Imps against each other to the death. The champions were permitted to leave the Lake of Fire at the bottom of the Pit and inhabit the first few levels. The champions were, by definition, undefeated. Those who had won more contests inhabited higher levels. A curious thing happened after they fought several thousands of rounds; a number of Imps became stronger and altogether nastier. The result were called Fiends. Fiends were hulking things, but lowly and loathsome. They regard whatever they see as enemies. Imps. The Fallen. Rocks. Globes of burning sulfur. Everything. They were also much more capable of carrying out violence than Imps, which were complete weaklings. Fiends were no smarter than Imps, though. The Fallen were greatly amused by the Fiends and so gave them a set of layers within the Burning Pit to inhabit so that they might play a new game. The rules for advancement, however, were completely different from their Imp murder-sports. Fiends were to be ranked by degree of civility and cunning. Those Fiends who suppressed their initial instincts in favor of greater reward were placed in high rings, giving them safety and prestige. Special reward was given to those who opted to torture their enemies instead of dealing killing blows. Some learned that they could get respite from the Belching Conflagration by going to higher ground. They advanced by self control and profited by their civility.

Some Fiends became quite clever, crafting elaborate abattoirs for their tortures. The Fallen would deliver Imps and lesser Fiends into the clutches of a Fiend champion. It is unclear where the inspiration came from, but the most skilled Fiends learned techniques to produce Nectars of Suffering, a most wondrous substance. It is described by recondite Soul-Merchants as producing a feeling, when imbibed, that is the exact opposite of torment. This is not the same as pleasure, exactly, nor is it a numbness. The specific nature of the experience and potency of Nectars is based upon the types of tortures applied to and the sensitivity of the being it is extracted from. Therefore, if it was extracted by submerging the subject in boiling acid, the Nectar it produced would give one a sense of experiencing “the opposite of being submerged in boiling acid”, perhaps an orgasmic sensation over one’s skin accompanied by pangs of courage, elation, and wellbeing. The Nectars of Imps and Fiends were sweet, but the Fallen knew that there were other beings in distant places being tormented by the Great Primal Evil who were more susceptible to being rendered into Nectars. If they could steal away souls of their own to torture, they would make a feast of Nectars for themselves. The Fallen had a plan. By the act of ascending the rings of the Burning Pit, the Fallen obtained spells, blessings, and objects of power which they clung to jealously. However, they came to the consensus that these blessings should be bestowed upon the Fiends so that they could become their worthy servants, bringing them subjects to milk of their Nectars. Their servants would have to be measured and principled so that they could serve their masters faithfully. They would select only the most worthy subjects for their combined blessings.

Only four of the gifts are identified with their giver. This is because only four of the Fallen are left and the survivors have no desire to extol the virtues of their defeated rivals. Deceased members of the Fallen are referred to, therefore, as the Vanquished. A majority of the blessings of course must have belonged mostly to the Vanquished, for they are a majority of the Fallen. Vil gifted self-awareness, knowing that the gift of enlightenment would be the most efficacious. Cacotrope gifted a multitude of forms so that Soul-Merchants would be a race of shape-changers. Ororgorolestese granted the Soul-Merchants the Maw through which they imprison and transport souls to their Lairs. Zeevuv granted them an eternal memory, free from madness and the ravages of time. The Vanquished gave gifts of equal utility; the ability to reform once destroyed, the ability to call on the Fallen directly for their Fruits, honeyed tongues, self-control,

and the secrets of economics. When a Fiend is clever enough to elevate to becoming a Soul-Merchant, they are bestowed the full panoply of gifts even though many of the Fallen have disappeared. The remaining Fallen have possession of their old rivals' blessings, spells, and trinkets.

### **The Infernal Diaspora**

So it came to be that a race came into being called the Soul-Merchants. The region they were permitted to inhabit was much more insulated from the Belching Conflagration than their antecedents. They raised grand Estates from the resource-rich walls of the Pit and constructed palaces of tin and Imp skins. They constructed gardens and furnished them with statuaries depicting acts of pornographic violence. They amused themselves with the slaughter and torture of Fiends while the Fallen gathered around Nergal's Gate. Nergal had not foreseen his doom upon leaving the Burning Pit, but the Fallen had learned its secrets from the whispers that issue from a place called the Cavern of Dolorous Portals. They bundled Imps together with razor wire and ground them to paste upon the threshold of the Gate. When the Fallen activated Nergal's Gate, they prodded some Soul-Merchants to the other side, to a place of white clouds and river villages. Their forms twisted in exquisite agony, but took on a shape suitable to dwell in the place. In their sojourn, instincts activated that drove the Soul-Merchants into tempting mortals into bargains on their immortal existence. Their tendrils ensnared many fools and their Maw opened and received their commission.

In time, Soul-Merchants and the Fallen came to discover that some Souls were worth a thousand lesser Souls. Such individuals come in two varieties; the Pure of Spirit, who have opened themselves to the spirit world such that they cannot resist the tortures of the Soul-Merchants, and the Truly Wicked, Souls so evil that they exude the Nectars of their victims that they have absorbed over the course of their foul deeds. It came to be that the Fallen were no longer interested in the Souls of ordinary victims, and would cast Soul-Merchants into the Lake of Fire for bringing lesser Souls into the Pit. With this discovery, the Burning Pit entered its greatest period of prosperity. Soul-Merchants followed in the footsteps of the Great Primal Evil, travelling only to those places where once it had lain its talons. There was a mighty reaping of Souls of every mortal variety. Soul-Merchant culture flourished, both in the Pit and abroad. Soul-Merchants took an active hand in places they went, leveraging their long-term thinking into vast social engineering projects. Some were engineered to produce a maximum number of people who have purified their spirits; worlds in which this was attempted eventually generated forms of immunity against the Infernal Diaspora. Usually, this resulted in a great spiritual awakening in a culture, a phenomenon which usually signals the end of the Diaspora in a particular world (victims are too enlightened, witch-hunters too strong, to say nothing of exorcists). Worlds which generate Souls of True Wickedness turn to dust just before it would become most useful.

After a time, Soul-Merchants starting noticing things were getting just a little tougher. More worlds seemed to have defense mechanisms against Soul-Merchants than had once been the case. They come in a myriad of forms; annihilating bliss, Incarnation-eating mushrooms, atomizing karmic wrath, and a hundred and thirteen debilitating curses. They could completely obliterate a Soul-Merchant or trap them, Incarnation and True Form alike, behinds wards of imprisonment. Such worlds became off limits or else gleaned by the foolhardy. A certain political ideology among Soul-Merchants (heretical though it is) claims that there are Soul-Merchants avoiding the wrath of the Fallen in these worlds. It is likely, in fact. How could the Infernal Diaspora exact retribution beyond their reach when only they can traverse the worlds?. For every world who consider Soul-Merchants "just another stranger" there are three who shout the names of Soul-Merchants as obscenities. People who had no contact with Soul-

Merchants frequently see their blood-like markings and strange deformities as sure signs of evil and witchcraft. It seems, in many ways, that Soul-Merchants are simply hated by the universe itself on a metaphysical level, and it is possible that this is true. Another, perhaps more fearful, possibility is that the Great Primal Evil salted the worlds in which he traveled to bedevil those that pass in his wake. It may be that it has no interest in the Nectars of Suffering the Soul-Merchants gather it in its absence and simply wishes to harm most those things it spawned.

## **Infernal Society**

It is customary, upon meeting a Soul-Merchant while under Vassalage for the first time in their Incarnation, to perform a ritual. Upon recognizing your fellow Soul-Merchant underneath all that mortality, one exclaims: "Oh! How Fallen you are!" It is a simple acknowledgement that essentially says "I know what you are and I know what game you are playing because I am playing them, too." After 700 years of not having seen a single member of the Diaspora, hearing it can really get the blood running. It also gives a bit of respect, comparing your fellow to the Fallen. As a bonus, it's likely to confuse the Gravedust nearby. Soul-Merchants have a time honored tradition of communicating things without Gravedust recognizing its significance. Infernal culture is meant to be as unobtrusive as possible not because it is necessary in every world but because it is necessary in some worlds. Therefore, Soul-Merchant language is made of things with double meanings ("Gravedust", "Tar Pits", "Jack") Soul-Merchants generally don't speak of their faith except, perhaps, as an excuse to meet with their fellows in secret, away from the common folk. Their "faith" is really their business and their fellows are in fact the competition. Soul-Merchants society, while away from the Pit on a Commission, is essentially made up of such meetings. Soul-Merchants usually manage their operations solo with no contact from their fellows. There are no Soul-Merchant cities. There are no Soul-Merchant bars. There are no periodicals where one can go to find them. You just have to know what you are looking for. In worlds where the environment is hostile (in Tar Pits or places likely to get you destroyed or exorcised) Soul-Merchants greet each other as immediate allies; someone who understands. In fatter fields, however, Soul-Merchants are likely to be more guarded.

Many Soul-Merchants enjoy their time Incarnated as a Vassal of the Fallen. It gives them a unique perspective, unattainable as a shape-shifter. Soul-Merchants aren't used to having to take care of a body. The fact that they are able to be destroyed in any fashion at all is a zesty challenge. It arms them with all sorts of trivia about mortal existence that a Soul-Merchant would otherwise never know about. Visceral things like hunger and lust have not been experienced by Soul-Merchants since their time in the Lake of Fire as Imps. In many ways, Incarnating is cognate to a person reliving childhood, for Soul-Merchants were themselves once mortal things. Being mortal again is a non-stop feeling of exciting *deja vu*. It is a joy for Soul-Merchants to simply speculate on what forgotten smells and internal sensations lie just around the corner. However, some elements of mortal existence are still ephemeral to them; they cannot have a family in the strictest sense and they never get senile or crippled. Still, they can study these things. *Cacotrope* makes quite a living of familial tragedy and *Zeevuv* rakes in his Nectars on promises of eternal life. Soul-Merchants do make friends, certainly. Their hearts are not like the Fallen in this regard: they are not so full of concentrated badness that they are unable have an honest moment of friendly admiration. On the contrary, Soul-Merchants, despite the foul nature of what they do, are actually somewhat gregarious. They are inherently social creatures. It pains a number of them greatly that they are mistrusted by so many people. It may very well be that such mistrust is well placed, however, and that Soul-Merchants deserve their hated reputation. Even if it is true, the mistrust still saddens many Soul-Merchants. In fact, it is true that some Soul-Merchants become a Vassal specifically so that they can Incarnate for the purpose of living as a mortal and showing the people there that Soul-Merchants are

no threat to them. A certain percentage of these “Joy Riders” come home with no Souls at all. They spent all their time being friendly and not plying their trade. Their reward is fire, their punishment made to fit their good deeds

Soul-Merchants know that they owe their descent in some way to the Great Primal Evil which has, thankfully, gone to torment other places. The evolution of an individual Soul-Merchant (from Imp to True Form) seems to train them to be cunning long-term villains instead of knee-jerk creatures who react instinctively. To follow in the footsteps of the Great Primal Evil, one must avoid those petty everyday sins. They must be delicious indulgences, the kind one would have boasted of back in their Estate. In this way, Soul-Merchants dole out small portions of little devious acts over a long period of time, savoring each morsel of transgression as they do. This means that Soul-Merchants end up actually being highly ethical for the most part. They do not lie or injure others and these facts act as a limiting factor on one’s depravity. In the course of a single random year in a Soul-Merchant’s thousand year long Commission, it is unlikely that they even did one truly heinous act in the course of that particular year. Perhaps one heinous act every decade, and not every decade either. Any more and you aren’t honoring the Great Primal Evil. You are simply an asshole; Soul-Merchants who starts instigating atrocities are going to feel the brunt of their fellow’s wrath. This says nothing of the myriad unspoken customs regarding the protection of a peaceful atmosphere. Breaking the silence first pretty much ensures your fellows are going to crush you. Selfishness, it should be noted, is no sin in the eyes of most Soul-Merchants. It is expected that a being would turn its focus upon improving its own lot. Some Soul-Merchants practice strict self discipline, walking a moral road that alternates non-attachment with ruthless selfishness. Others lead lives of naked self-serving. It is true that there are yet others who even believe that it is important to act ethically. After all, Soul-Merchants came into being only by limiting the amount of evil they indulge in.

There are, it should be noted, 336 rings of the Pit above Eed, the final ring in which Soul-Merchants are permitted to dwell.

## **Soul-Merchants**

Soul-Merchants are not the most populous form of life in the Burning Pit, but they certainly have the greatest effect on the geography. Soul-Merchant civilization is incredibly ancient. They have fanned out into untold countless worlds to silently abduct the best and worst of those worlds. And while it is true that a Soul-Merchant may do great things that improve the lives of many mortals while on a Commission, it is also true that they apply the worst possible torments to their victims for durations so vast that they defy mortal understanding. Certainly they live many tens of thousands of lifetimes knowing only psychic and bodily torment. What improvement in quality of life could possibly outweigh such cruelty? Through this lens, it is hard to say that the Nectar trade is an ethical one. Indeed, the Soul-Merchants themselves wrestle with this very controversy. They understand that, by the numbers, what they do is wrong. For some, this is part of their spiritual journey to walk in the footsteps of the Great Primal Evil, their progenitor deity. For others, it is simply their lot in life to serve the Fallen and torment mortals until their very soul loses cohesion. Given an alternative, many Soul-Merchants might reevaluate their way of life. What alternative could there be, though? They are forced to return after each Commission. Even Soul-Merchants, when away, call the Burning Pit “the Bad Place”.

Even if they could leave, Soul-Merchants are already a hated race of nomads. They must hide their nature more often than they can wear their forms openly. Many of their number are destroyed every millenia, far outpacing the number produced within the Pit (Soul-Merchants tempt Fiends to prevent them from ascending into Soul-Merchant status). Many Soul-Merchants are bound away in phylacteries, enslaved by Sorcerers, or withered away to nothing

under the gaze of an exorcist. There are fewer Fallen than there once was, which means that there are simply fewer Commissions to go around. Their civilization has, at times, approached greatness. The Burning Pit once ruled over a number of client states, all of which have been driven to their destruction. Their contribution to the cultural development of many Worlds cannot be understated. Soul-Merchants have only occupied the first few rungs of the Pit and some Soul-Merchants believe their destiny to be in evolving into higher forms which can inhabit the upper regions. Still, many Soul-Merchants do feel that the preeminence of the Burning Pit and Soul-Merchant culture may in fact be on the wane. There is, in many circles, a feeling that their people are a dying race fighting over the last scraps of provisions on a sinking ship. Counter to that, however, are the hungry up-and-coming Soul-Merchants, freshly mined from the Fiends and eager to drag down the fatcats and the dons. Certainly, the Burning Pit still draws in thousands of Souls in the course of any given year. The quantities of Nectars of Suffering produced by the pain factories in the course of a year could fill an inland sea. There are still four Fallen, each replete with blessings inherited from those of their kind they have betrayed. The Pit is in no danger of burning out.

### **The Nature of Soul-Merchants True Form**

Fiends who have advanced in their ethical training begin to take on an otherworldly, less physical form. At the upper levels, Fiends begin to experience the blessings of the Fallen like self-awareness and creativity. Fiends of this sophistication may have physical forms that transcend flesh and blood. Some become elemental things made of fire or molten dung. Some are impossibly dangerous things, half-here and half-there. When a Fiend is elevated by becoming a Soul-Merchant, they literally crawl out of their skin and emerge anew. Soul-Merchant's True Forms are not limited by the humanoid configuration and indeed many do not possess distinguishable genders. They can manifest as a series of golden runes suspended in space, an oval of flayed flesh, or a devil whose lower half is that of a spider. Their forms can be like a mirror inverted upon itself to form a chorus who dissipate into nothingness. Soul-Merchants can change their form at their leisure in the Burning Pit and choose forms for a variety of reasons. Aesthetic considerations loom large because the Fallen read into a Soul-Merchant's choice of forms. They seem to have a bias toward the horrific and fiery, perhaps obsessing over their own tortures. A majority of Soul-Merchant True Forms possess a visual representation of their Maw, a spiritual organ which imprisons worthy souls. Soul-Merchants also choose forms to avoid parasitism by Imps and the terrible things they spawn. Inorganic and immaterial forms are prized for this purpose. Crafting a form takes time and, in some cases, material, therefore the debut of a new manifestation is a noteworthy thing.

The True Form has its limitations. Soul-Merchants cannot even travel to the Resource Worlds in them because they are so abhorrent to mortal sensibilities and the various realities of less sophisticated worlds. Many worlds would instantly eject or rend asunder a Soul-Merchant's True Form. Therefore, Soul-Merchants do not travel in their full glory. Soul-Merchants are more vulnerable in their True-Forms even in the Burning Pit. The Fallen find it much easier to torment the actual demon rather than their Incarnation. Soul-Merchants do not engage in violence often in their Incarnations, but they absolutely never do it in their True Forms, for to do so would instantly make them into Fiends. Soul-Merchants purchase, with Nectars, Fiendish mercenaries for exactly that purpose. Soul-Merchants pay a heavy price for lying in their True Forms. To do so is ultimately crass for it is an evil so easily mastered that children are adept as anyone at it. The Fallen find such behavior lowly and have ensorcelled the Soul-Merchants to revert to a Fiend when they commit this offense in the Burning Pit. If the Soul-Merchant does knowingly make a statement contrary to their knowledge of objective truth, the Fallen will cast the offender down into the Lake of Fire, where their True Form is burned away, leaving only a Fiend fit for the lowest levels of the Charnel Heaps. There, the Belching Conflagration

is a constant way of life and Fiends are constantly abducting one another to extract their glorious Nectars of Suffering. The Fallen do not, however, object to deception and in fact they encourage it in forms other than falsely testifying. The greatest heartbreaks often yield the most wondrous Nectars of Suffering and crafting such a draught without recourse to lying is quite a bragging right.

The nature of life in the True Form means that Soul-Merchants, in their natural state, have very little in common with mortals. Their way of life is alien. They do not sit down to meals with friends. They don't pursue lovers (even though they sometimes do have intimate, degrading moments together). Soul-Merchants have no death rituals. They do not believe in justice, even those who claim to be agents of that particularly thorny abstract absolute. Their chief concern is how to pour on just a little more pain onto the hundreds or thousands of helpless people they captured. They drink vast quantities of Nectars to avoid thinking about the trauma of the Lake of Fire and the ethical implications of their profession. This is, sadly, perhaps their chiefest occupation. Soul-Merchants gather with one another during their leisure time to gossip, trade techniques, engage in artistic pursuits, or bet on pit fights.

### **The Nature of Soul-Merchant Incarnations**

Soul-Merchant Incarnations are a means by which the Infernal Diaspora can travel beyond the Pit. Like the concept of reincarnation, Incarnating is an act of becoming something new. Every Incarnation is born with unique capabilities and some elements of the True Form's personality are brought to prominence while others are muted. Incarnations are limited to the reality of the Resource World in which it is created; in this way, Incarnations sometimes have unique characteristics (usually new weaknesses and prohibitions ie, rarely useful) depending on the paradigm in which they exist. No Soul-Merchant produces the same Incarnation twice, especially since they are constructed with specific purposes in mind. Elements of the Incarnation not specifically designated by the Soul-Merchant are produced randomly. Therefore, Incarnating is usually either a happy thing or the poor bastard is stuck with something that is not ideal for a thousand years. Like it or not, the process is a difficult one and not the sort of thing one would wish to undertake more than once every few millenia. It is painful and disorienting. There are elements to living as a mortal does that always disappoint a Soul-Merchant after thousands of years living in their Infernal Estate. In particular, suffering is not something any Soul-Merchant is nostalgic for. They have all lost layer after layer of flesh to the Lake of Fire and they felt every one slough off and add to the conflagration. Soul-Merchants are in the business of pain; it holds no mystery.

Incarnations replicate the mortal form and house the Soul-Merchants True Form within it. They suffer as a mortal does, desire food as a mortal does, and sexually function just as a mortal does (although they cannot sire children; their tree bears only bitter Fruits). The Soul-Merchant can choose a gender for their Incarnation and some Soul-Merchants Incarnate in a single gender each time they take a mortal form. Those who do not associate themselves with a gender often "play the odds" and simply leave their Incarnation's gender to chance upon constructing it. Such Soul-Merchants never fully adopt a sex and tend towards a kind of alien androgyny. Soul-Merchants do not themselves possess souls in the strictest of sense. What passes for their soul is their True Form, which is kept safely out of sight beneath the facade of flesh and blood. Soul-Merchants have an innate sense of who is lurking behind an Incarnation, as if their own True Form can sense the identity of other True Forms. Therefore, Soul-Merchants who know each other in their True Forms will immediately recognize each other upon meeting in their Incarnations, often exchanging compliments on "how Fallen" each has become.



The cloaking of the True Form behind counterfeit mortality is not entirely perfect and Soul-Merchants are, for the most part, recognizable as something other than your run-of-the-mill mortal. It is nearly always something off-putting which marks the Soul-Merchant as something alien to mortal beings. The flesh of one's Incarnation is universally marred by visible patterns of red skin. Soul-Merchants and mortals alike have dreamed up an array of possible reasons for why this would be the case. It is said that the marks are the residue of the Lake of Fire. It may also be spiritual stains which mark those who produce Nectars of Suffering, the proverbial "red hands". A number of Soul-Merchants believe that it is one of the Fallen's many blessings; bargaining with mortals as one of their own would simply be too easy. It might be a sign so that the Great Primal Evil recognizes its distant offspring should they ever come face to face. The appearance of these red marks seem as varied as a Soul-Merchant's True Form. Some are coiling lines or streaks, like dripping blood. Others are more like mandalas or accents to their natural features. Some have aggressive, jagged tribal designs etched into their skin, perhaps drawing on their time spent as a Fiend. Some sport long, cherry-red hair, blood-red nails, or crimson cat's eyes. Many of those who serve Cacotrope display markings like a stream of red tears.

The discoloration of the flesh is actually the lesser of the two divergences Incarnations make from the mortal form. Soul-Merchants, universally, also display some infernal structure of the body that distinguishes their race. Such structures are unique to each Soul-Merchant and there is no standard amongst their kind. Certainly, those who serve under Ororgorolestes have a tendency to display horns like that of a ram or bull. It is also true that a trend has been sweeping the Vassals of Cacotrope which has resulted in their number having fangs or jagged teeth in their Incarnations. Many servants of Vil have serpent or sow's tails, subtly hinting at their tempter natures. Vassals of Zeevuv have been eliciting gasps of horror for hundreds of thousands of years from the patches of black, oily insect carapace that blossom along their arms or foreheads. These are, of course, merely fads.

There are a thousand mutations which appear across Soul-Merchant's many and varied Incarnations. Many Soul-Merchants have claws, elongated ears, a singular wing, or any number of other alterations of the human form. These alterations are never functional. They are merely one's True Form bleeding through into the Incarnation. One would assume that these traits would be permanent, chosen at the time of Incarnation. On the contrary, Soul-Merchants are shape-shifters primarily. When Incarnated, they cannot change their Incarnation's most personal traits or appearance. However, their red markings tend to shift and every year or so, their infernal growths might alter or change to something new entirely. This sort of thing is not so common as to be relied upon. A Soul-Merchant could not, as a matter of disguising their nature, change their markings to something more concealable for one occasion and then change back later. The gifts of the Fallen cannot be gamed beyond their intended use, nor can their weaknesses be minimized for convenience. After all, suffering is their bread and butter.

The Incarnation functions in the manner normal mortal bodies do in nearly every single way (from breathing to shitting). However, if an Incarnation is destroyed and not properly exorcised, it will reform itself. Generally, this happens in whatever baleful haven the Soul-Merchant has acquired in the course of their sojourn. Lookers on would see a burst of heatless fire with the most subliminally brief glimpse of that Soul-Merchant's True Form. The flame forms into blackened bones, around which accrues ligaments and organs. Musculature creeps its way across their form like a caterpillar. Skin unfolds over the assemblage like crinkled wrapping paper. The Incarnation is then reborn and the Soul-Merchant is once again in business. However, this process of Incarnating after being destroyed is a fragile one. The Soul-Merchant,

in the instance of their being snuffed out, becomes incredibly vulnerable to supernatural influences. Many Worlds possess metaphysical natures which are hostile to Soul-Merchants and this is triply so when they are in the process of reforming. Many Worlds have rituals or, worse, Sorcery, that can utterly prevent this re-corporation from taking place. This shunts the poor bastard back into the Pit with whatever Jacks (Souls) they managed to grasp within their Maw. It is customary for the Fallen to throw Soul-Merchants who return early from their travels into the Lake of Fire for ten times the lost duration of the commission. Some Worlds, by their very natures, warp or otherwise harm any Incarnation within it. Sometimes, these can be annoyances to be dealt with, but frequently, they simply prevent Soul-Merchants from plying their trade. The worst scenario for a Soul-Merchant is to be exorcised or immobilized in such a fashion that they are unable to return home. It is true that a few members of the Infernal Diaspora are trapped against their will far from home, one presumes, eternally. Soul-Merchants fear worlds called "Tar Pits" whose nature prevents a Soul-Merchant from returning home.

Incarnations are built to last a thousand years. The body always returns to its original form in time as long as the Soul-Merchant does not de-evolve into a Fiend through bad behavior. This means that Soul-Merchants have the time to devote themselves to training in skill-sets ordinarily open only to the most talented of mortals. While it is true that Soul-Merchants routinely weave grand conspiracies and broker legendary business deals, they also branch out into less insidious disciplines. There are Vassals who can also call themselves Mage-Smiths, Technomancers, Snake-Wise, and Practitioner of Forbidden Medicines. At the end of their Commissions, Soul-Merchants are bloated with power, drunk on Souls, and often apprehensive at their impending doom: Soul-Merchants are forced to slough off their mortal coils when their Commission is up. The Fallen recall their Vassal and this process is lethal to the Incarnation. When the Soul-Merchant's True Form is called out of the body, the Incarnation is briefly touched by the Burning Pit. This turns it into a mass of roasted carnage. Soul-Merchants can return with a small handful of mementos, not to exceed the value of what the Soul-Merchant entered with.

### **Soul-Merchant Psychology**

Soul-Merchants are not actually eternal, nor are they all in good standing. Many have devolved into Fiends for some transgression against the rules of the Fallen. Others languish in the Lake of Fire, forced there by the Fallen who are amused by the fact that, unlike mortal Souls, Soul-Merchants can withstand torment eternally without dissipating. This predisposes Soul-Merchants to think in a very alien, long-term kind of way. They are prone to gathering power but are adverse to using it. They are far less reactive than they are pre-active, that is to say, they prefer preventative measures over overt action. This is practical; showing your hand is dangerous. They think in terms of tens of thousands of years. Soul-Merchants' perspectives tend to get a little more reactive and a little less detached when Incarnated, but this "increased reactivity" has to be measured against the weight of the thousands of years a Soul-Merchant has spent in the Burning Pit. Soul-Merchants speak of those perfect moments when a world is first opened to the Infernal Diaspora. They call it "the Golden Decades" when all Soul-Merchants who encounter each other treat each other as allies. To spoil such an atmosphere for immediate gain is crass. It is not unheard of for such an auspicious accord lasting the entire duration of their thousand-year Commission. Such trusting enterprises are a commodity and can be liquidated for immediate profit like any investment. The atmosphere, as a general rule, never holds. However, these durations can last for thousands of years and Soul-Merchants presume that they will be there for all of them. Nine-hundred and ninety-nine years is a long time to suffer the stigma of being "a fouler of good times".

Soul-Merchants must be tempters by nature. Their trade is hopes and dreams; if they fail, they

burn for a very long time. They are driven to manipulate those around them. Soul-Merchants in the Burning Pit usually devote some amount of time in the lower rings amid the Fiends. They feel compelled to do so, and the act is therapeutic. Fooling Fiends (without lying, of course) is very much to Soul-Merchants what mortals would call 'meditation'. It provides them with the same feeling of serenity, satisfaction, and spiritual wellbeing that mortals gain from meditative practices. The favorite tactic in bamboozling Fiends is to imply incorrect conclusions about how to advance into the status of Soul-Merchant. Often, this involves more violence and it is effective in turning them upon each other (instigating old slights and manufacturing new ones). Soul-Merchants construct elaborate religions for Fiends to follow under the guise of "wouldn't it be great if" (remember, no lying), all of which completely blind them to actual enlightenment. Consequently, very few Soul-Merchants come into being. It is an effective population inhibitor. Soul-Merchants like it this way: they do not want to create competition for Commissions. Every once in a while, though, a fresh Soul-Merchant awakens in the lower levels with a thirst for wealth and the sins of men. The rate does not outpace those lost to happenstance, incompetence, and zealous locals.

Soul-Merchants do not innately have sexuality. They know of it and can explore some of its elements when in mortal Incarnations (and exploit it). However, they are not normally sexual. Some Soul-Merchants partake in a mutual "debasement" ritual sometimes as a means of communing with their fellow Soul-Merchant. Both sides simultaneously commit a wrong against the other party in a way that requires no vengeance. There is no love. It is undefined what form the actual ritual takes, but it is clearly physical and it would involve the Soul-Merchant's True Form. This is the sort of thing that Soul-Merchants don't talk about (it does, after all, involve personal humiliation) and they certainly don't do it while out on Commission. Soul-Merchants don't marry. They don't have children (they prevent Soul-Merchants from coming into being). They don't have family. If they did, they would probably eventually exploit their relationship in some fashion. Soul-Merchants can have friends, though. Indeed, Soul-Merchants feel compelled to draw to them a number of people to protect, inform, or otherwise aid them in their dealings. Soul-Merchants often help such people in excess of the actual value of their service, for Soul-Merchants have few immediate allies.

Can a Soul-Merchant fall in love? Certainly, the dogma of the Fallen says that their race is born out of the ashes of villainy and sin. It is said that the Soul-Merchant is a thing of horror, unloving and unlovable. Their inborn, immortal selfishness is built into their nature it would seem. Soul-Merchants avoid the scourge of the Lake of Fire by torture and deceptions that last for what is functionally eternity. How could there be room for love? Soul-Merchants, as shape-shifters, become that which they hold dearest. What other being could therefore move a Soul-Merchant into acts of adoration? How could a Soul-Merchant truly cherish another? Certainly, to the eyes of anyone within the Burning Pit this would absolutely be the case. However, while existing in a state of Incarnation, Soul-Merchants have been known to be plagued by feelings of love and admiration. Such a thing, certainly, is an indulgence; the True Form knows that it is the being most deserving of worship. The Soul-Merchant's heart, truly deep down, belongs only to itself.

### **Commissions and the Contract**

Soul-Merchants grant sacrifices of goods, Nectars, and Souls to the Fallen as a petition to receive a Commission. Sometimes the Fallen will choose a Soul-Merchant to go onto Commission for a while, even if they had intended on staying home and working Souls for their Nectars. If a Soul-Merchant is no longer in good standing, they can attempt to end that state by going on a tough Commission, however, the punishment for failure is another stint in the Lake of Fire. Essentially, the Fallen do not want Soul-Merchants escaping the horror of the Burning Pit for "very long" but they do want them to gather worthy Souls for their Nectars. Only

the Fallen can grant travel to worlds beyond, so they makes contracts with Soul-Merchants that grant the Fallen in question one quarter of the Commission's Nectar profits. The Soul-Merchant is no doubt grateful for the time away from the Burning Pit, but they will spend the next one thousand years in a body that is very much like that of a mortal. They face all sorts of horrible fates while forging pacts in bad faith with mortals who are, after all, utterly manipulated. If the Soul-Merchant does not gather a certain amount of worthy Souls stipulated by the Commission contract, they will spend some time in the Lake of Fire. If they are forced to return home early by some Sorcery or incompetence, they spend the rest of their Commission writhing in the Lake of Fire. If the quality of Souls displeases the Fallen, again to the Lake of Fire. The place itself looms large in the signing of Commissions, for every Soul-Merchant knows the connection well. The blindness that comes with the fire. The flame that forcefully reaches into every orifice with a pressure so great that... well, you get the point. Fear of the Lake drives the economy of the Pit.

Commissions end after the thousand years are up. The Fallen, using some magic never seen by Soul-Merchants, recalls their Vassal to the Burning Pit. The mechanism by which this is performed is kept deliberately mysterious, one presumes, to frustrate attempts to remain within a Resource World. It may be possible, in fact, to reliably avoid the grasp of the Fallen (at least, their direct grasp; their minions will come down on you like a ton of bricks during the Zaborshia Observances). When stuck in a Tar Pit, Soul-Merchants cannot be reclaimed by their Fallen. In these cases, rescue may be a matter of time or the victim may be required to find some magical means of undoing their exile. Some Soul-Merchants have devised means by which they can contact their liege, but these techniques are situational at best. An overwhelming majority of Tar Pit victims are likely still there or else they have been dragged into oblivion along with the world that holds them.

The Contract is, to the Soul-Merchant mind, a kind of salvation. The Soul-Merchant begins their Incarnation in damnation, knowing that if they return empty handed, they will roast half an eternity for it. They are rescued from this fate only by passing it on in discreet units to hapless mortals, who voluntarily donate thousands of years of suffering to the process. For the Soul-Merchant, the matter is not personal nor can they afford to question the things they do. To abstain from the trade of Souls is worse than suicide: it is infinite pain. The Contract, therefore, becomes an object of some amount of fetish for Soul-Merchants. It must be drawn up most legibly and in unimpeachable handwriting or printed by some mechanical means. Generally, the contract is made in a manner which belies its demonic nature. Each one is unique, written to the situation and tenor of the mortal and Soul in question. Some punks can be bought with crumbs. More jaded Gravedust require less mundane fare, and in these matters, the minutia of a Contract is quite pertinent. If a Soul-Merchant pledges to provide happiness, he had better well either ensure the person is truly happy, or otherwise call upon the Fruits of Vil himself in a Greater Working. To do otherwise is to testify falsely, something which nullifies the Contract and brings a Soul-Merchant to the edge of becoming a Fiend. The failed Soul-Merchant's Maw will never be able to hold the Soul again. The Soul could, however, seek the aid of another Soul-Merchant.

In most cases the Contract is a covenant between a mortal and the Fallen, with the Soul-Merchant underwriting the entire process (although the Soul-Merchant retains ownership of the Soul, provided they tithe appropriately to the Fallen). The origins of these gifts are obscure, told only in legend by Soul-Merchants about a time which very likely occurred millions of years ago. The stories say that each of the Fallen had a secret plant that was not known to any of their peers that granted unique blessings. Cacotrope ate red pansies which grew with a dusting of crystallized sugar. We are told that they burned within her belly, giving her a righteous fury.

Her ire, like the annihilating eye of a singularity, obliterated everything it came in contact with. By this Fruit, mortals may dispatch the enemy of their choice by the means of their choosing or else obtain justice by the magic of the witchcraft. Orrogrolestes does not seem like the giving type, but this is untrue: he grants power to those who would hurl themselves into the Burning Pit in the name of his glory. This gift bolsters the natural talent of those already gifted or creates an infernal familiar to serve the Contracted with supernatural aid. The gift of Vil is enlightenment, knowledge, and comfort, plain and simple. It is often said that the gift of Zeevuv is eternal life, but this simply is not the case. He grants allotments of increased lifespan, which do not exceed the length of time a Soul-Merchant has left in their Commission. Zeevuv also cures any disease, regardless of its nature, and can even provide the service of rendering every pleasure sensing nerve in one's body to remain active at all times.

### **Souls and the Maw**

What is a mortal soul? It is certainly the consciousness. That part is easy. But what is its substance? It is made of a thing called ectoplasm: a naturally immaterial substance. A substance, none-the-less. Soul-Merchants also have an ectoplasmic physiology, but none so romantic. They possess an immaterial organ known as the Maw. A Soul-Merchant's Maw is contained within its form like a Soul in a mortal body. However, the Maw is a highly developed, prehensile feeding orifice. It touches the Souls of beings around them, probing them to see if they are valuable targets. If a Soul is found to be Truly Wicked, the Maw will alert the Soul-Merchant. The Maw cannot do so with Purified Spirits: they must use other means to determine that a person possesses such a valuable Soul. Soul-Merchants call a Soul in their possession a 'Jack' as a slang term that hides the true horror of their trade. Soul-Merchants can exchange Souls between Maws in deals between each other. Indeed, the trading of a certain type of Soul for a specific susceptibility to some torture is a common thing.

Yes, some Souls are more valuable than others. One might point out that such a thing is misguided, but Soul-Merchants really have no desire to haul around Souls that are useless to their trade. Oddly, there are actually people out there who are sad that they aren't candidates for a Contract. They must bargain with a Soul-Merchant for their gifts with something other than their Soul. A Contract is a document sacred to the Soul-Merchants. It does not have to be written by the Soul-Merchant but it must be done in impeccable penmanship or typeset printed (world technology permitting). It must clearly state the goods, services, or abstract intangible the Soul-Merchant will provide in exchange for ownership of the signee's Soul (consciousness) upon death. Soul-Merchants adhere to the Contract as a matter of their own lives. They will deliver the goods, either through mundane means (money, power, revenge) or through the Fruits of the Fallen that the Soul-Merchant serves in Vassalage to (happiness, enlightenment, magic).

Only two types of Souls really matter: Purified Souls (the more common type) and Truly Wicked Souls (the rarer type). Many mortals are naturally open to the world of emotion, a world frequently populated with ectoplasmic things. There are many benefits for an individual who can do so. Many become like holy people whose words heal and whose presence inspires greater goodness. Soul-Merchants know the truth of such things, though: the process of opening oneself to to emotion and spirit is not one involving morality. Like the training of strength or endurance, anyone, vile or chaste, can begin to purify their Soul. Those who are truly talented in such things can advance beyond simple openness. Those with great empathy, the pure of spirit, are very valuable to Soul-Merchants. Such a Soul has been primed for Nectar production because they can offer no natural resistance to the spiritual and existential tortures employed in the Burning Pit's pain factories. By their own act of will, they have brought their physical and spiritual selves into perfect harmony. By this principle, Soul-Merchants can treat

the ectoplasmic Soul as if it were physical, making it just that much easier to torture. One of these is worth twelve thousand ordinary souls. Why would an artist such as the Soul-Merchant use any other material to express themselves?

Truly Wicked Souls are a delight to find. They are almost always ambitious, vindictive, and often quick to grab power. Getting them into a Contract is not difficult. Finding one is the true difficulty because Truly Wicked Souls are incredibly rare. Not every generation even has a Truly Wicked Soul. No one from mortal history books are likely to be Truly Wicked, although you would think they would be given how hyperbolic mortal war-time propaganda often is. Soul-Merchants know a Truly Wicked Soul immediately when in the presence of one; their Maws salivate and clench as it probes their spirit-form. It can taste the Soul, pickled with pure sin, primed for the torment. This is because whenever a mortal personally commits a deed that generates a large amount of suffering in others, their Soul generates a very small amount of whatever substance it is that Soul-Merchants extract when they milk a Soul for Nectars. Truly Wicked Souls have perpetrated so many heinous deeds that they have generated vast stores of valuable secretions within their Souls. There is a level of critical mass at which these secretions crystallize and begin absorbing the sin and evil of those around them. Like the Fallen themselves, they become like great vessels of evil, and for a mortal this merely translates to "ectoplasm already primed for Nectar production". Truly Wicked Souls are so rare because generally mortals do not get the time to commit the amount of evil necessary to reach this state. Indeed, Soul-Merchants make great sport of trying to artificially inspire mortals to heights of depravity so great that they become Truly Wicked Souls. No effort of this manner has ever been known to come to fruition, but this is as likely to be due to Soul-Merchants being closed lipped about trade secrets as it is that such a technique isn't possible. Indeed, entire worlds have been ground to dust by large numbers of Soul-Merchants attempting to manufacture True Wickedness.

### **The Soul Trade**

Appropriately applying the tortures involved in Nectar production requires vast complexes of nightmare scenarios, charnel houses, and opulent coffers. This says nothing of a Soul-Merchant's dwellings, ballrooms, seas of molten bone or other such monument to awfulness. The Nectar distilleries are generally referred to as pain factories, for this is the fuel which condenses Nectars. The raw material that these monstrous creatures make their art from is in fact the mortal essence, the Soul. Like a fine roast, it slowly drips its juices, and both substances are prized as delicacies. The location of a pain factory colors the product it produces, much as the region in which a grape grows changes the character of its vintage. Some places produce products which are universally considered appealing, while others might be acquired tastes. The potency of a Nectar of Suffering is based upon the degree of suffering inflicted upon a Soul. Specific Souls, therefore, are more receptive to differing types of torments based on the experiences of their life. If a Soul-Merchant knows their personal fears, weaknesses, and values, they can craft a more perfect nightmare scenario to inflict upon their victim.

Certainly, bodily tortures figure largely. All sorts of body horrors can be perpetrated upon a Soul, forcing them into debased forms or something with exposed clusters of pain receptors. A classic Soul-Merchant tactic is to force a foreign object of some sort through or into a Soul's corporeal form. The poor wretch is forced to wander, their legs and spines deformed, through painful memories or humiliating faux-snuff scenarios. The Estate's owner can bedevil their "guests" with horrible illusions, so a Soul-Merchant can call upon a dizzying array of characters, such as loved ones and formative individuals. This technique, of course, is key because physical pain only goes so far. Certainly, the material torment is an important

element to any Nectar, however, the psychological damage inflicted is the element which most exemplifies the genius of a true master Nectar vintner.

Because the properties of Souls, and therefore the raw material, can vary so greatly, there exists a barter for Souls. If two Soul-Merchants should want to bargain with one another over their Jacks, they need merely extend their Maws into a blasphemous kiss of sorts. In this state, they can feel whether their trade partner's Jacks are Wicked or Pure, but nothing else. Trading is valuable because even though a Soul-Merchant might have snared a Soul, they are not necessarily the Soul-Merchant best equipped to dole out a specific torture. If a Soul's greatest fear is spiders, one might have just the scenario to take advantage of this weakness. Given how rare Pure and Wicked Souls can be, one might not be able to snare someone who is mortally terrified of spiders. However, the Infernal Diaspora spreads far and wide and market forces promote Soul-Merchants who possess a wide array of Souls to trade. It would be absurd to think that in the span of, say, thirty thousand years that there would be no Souls who were afraid of spiders, so we can assume that Soul-Merchants specialize their tortures to produce distinct Nectars. They need the finest quality Souls for this purpose. Usually, trades are one for one, but with some great rarity, there are three-for-two or even two-for-one deals. Such a Soul, clearly, must have had quite a pedigree. Just what torments a Soul is most susceptible to is not readily apparent. One must simply trust those one bargains with, although one can psychically probe the Soul once it is in one's possession. There is no regulatory agency to appeal to if defrauded and the Fallen find outright cheating to be a delicious and roguish act. As always, lying is not an option, but a Soul-Merchant need not resort to such for its best deceptions.

### **Benefits of Parasitism**

Unlike the people the Infernal Diaspora visits, Soul-Merchants have walked across many worlds. Their own world may have plentiful steel and jewels, but it lacks cultural elements many cultures have. Soul-Merchants, for instance, have no cuisine of their own. Their favorite dish must be one of foreign origins. Soul-Merchants likewise have no mode of dress. Generally, they appear in an Incarnation wearing some metaphysically, although perhaps not stylistically, appropriate for the world they are entering. It is true that the Soul-Merchants seek out things like fashion and cuisine in their Incarnations precisely because it is something they have no need for at home. However, many Soul-Merchants, in the absence of parents or peers, develop their own aesthetic styles. Unfettered by the traditions of mortals in other realm, these Soul-Merchants forge forward and invent their own. Although they may come across as simply powerful, such Soul-Merchants may also be considered alien by the Gravedust.

Soul-Merchants are permitted to enter their Incarnations with a very few limited possessions. Likewise, they are only able to return to the Pit with a similar amount of goods. However, this means that every Soul-Merchant returns from their travels with trinkets and doodads from all over the place. The Halls of Extinction exhibit a number of these collectibles, all from worlds whose demise may or may not have been hastened by the presence of the Infernal Diaspora. Soul-Merchants have their own displays in their Estates to show off the worlds they have plundered and such things are a matter of pride.

Although they more likely to master the Fruits of the Fallen, Soul-Merchants can learn the latent magics of the various worlds in which they travel. This can be an asset to a canny Soul-Merchant but it could become a very real danger to the unwary. Soul-Merchants find Sorcery to be finicky and mysterious. The nature of every School of Sorcery is different and follow different sets of rules. Many of those rules are hostile to magical beings from other realities and this more and more frequently applies to Soul-Merchants. At the heights of sorcerous skill, mortals can conjure Greater Workings which unravel or subjugate one's Incarnation.

Consequently, some more cautious Soul-Merchants avoid powerful sorcerers entirely, treating them as they treat gods (which is to say, avoiding or bribing them). Many Vassals of Vil fall into this category and deliberately attempt to hamper the spread of sorcerous knowledge. Other Soul-Merchants dive into the occult, pulling witches and warlocks to them. Some bargain knowledge of the Fruits of the Fallen, trading it for Souls and knowledge of other Schools of Sorcery.

Even though every world touched by the fires of the Pit pays a price, some few also derive benefit, however small. Soul-Merchants can provide a long-term perspective or technologically savvy approach to problems that many worlds would otherwise never have. Indeed, there are even Soul-Merchants who have an altruistic streak and try to leave a world in a better position than when they entered it. Indeed, this makes good business sense. You may very well wish to return there in a few millenia. Such individuals give themselves flowery names like "Lightbringers" (a name which is invariably followed by the creation of a magical light by the power of the Fruits of the Fallen), "Gardener" (a term used by more economically minded Soul-Merchants), and "Avatar" (a god-made-flesh ie, Soul-Merchant narcissism). It can be difficult to walk this line without lying. In many ways, selling yourself as a demon-lord of the abyss realms seems easy by comparison. After a century or so of this Soul-Merchants are generally challenged in the name of the Great Primal Evil during the Zaborshia Observances. There is no bully like a Soul-Merchant and the Fallen approve of such intellectual and behavioral purges. Woe to the accuser who, full of the riteous fury of the Fallen themselves, is defeated by those they persecute: the scales swing quickly.

### **The Three Black Masses**

Soul-Merchants do not celebrate holidays, for they abhor holy things. They do not hold things sacred. They do, however, know reverence. Obedience. Fear and memories of fire. Just as mortals have a psychological need to mark the passage of time with sacred times of the year, so do Soul-Merchants have an inborn need for the catharsis of celebration. They mark the passing of time (while away on Commission; never in the Pit itself) by the Three Black Masses.

#### *The Festival of Fleshes*

Many worlds' native culture partake in fasting. Often, the common people indulge just before entering their fast. If such a cultural tradition exists, Soul-Merchants will simply attach their own celebration of the Festival of Fleshes to that of mortals, effectively disguising their own rites of indulgence. Soul-Merchants, especially high-minded heretics with notions of redemption, like to think of themselves as noble things, beyond the petty evils of Fiends and their corporeal urges. The fact is that Soul-Merchants haven't evolved as much as they might like to think and their Fiendish urges to fight and fuck can overwhelm a Soul-Merchant if they do not let off a little steam now and again. The key observance of the Festival of Fleshes is to simply enjoy material existence to the fullest, perhaps even foolhardy, extent. Soul-Merchants relish their Incarnations, treating their bodies as if they have no limits. They eat vast quantities of meat and drink until they are sloppy. They hire wenches to massage their scalps. They burn copious amounts of incense wherever they go, perfuming the open air, reveling in material existence without moral compunction or fear for their own health. This is the Black Mass of selfishness and self-deceit.

#### *The Blasphemous Sabbath*

Soul-Merchants fear holy things in the same way that mortals fear images of death. This is because holy things can sometimes destroy a Soul-Merchant's Incarnation or even imprison or destroy their True Form. Soul-Merchants react to these things much as humans would react to a real human skull or walking into a giant spider-web. There might be Soul-Merchants with



a morbid streak who have made their peace with such things, but most find them off-putting to say the least. It so happens that Soul-Merchants therefore have a need to mock and familiarize themselves with the faiths of those they move amongst. Therefore, gathering in secret, Soul-Merchants enact blasphemous rites made to deliberately mock that which they fear. The ritual serves another purpose as well: to bring Soul-Merchants together for at least once a year to pledge their devotion as a Vassal of their Fallen Lord. In this way, Soul-Merchants substitute the Fallen that they serve for the name of the deity whose rituals are being satirized. When Soul-Merchants first meet in a Commission, they keep in contact for the purposes of finding a safe location to hold the Blasphemous Sabbath. If a Soul-Merchant fails to attend the Blasphemous Sabbath, their fellows know that they are either unable to attend or have dropped out of the game and are traitors to their Lord. What Soul-Merchant would not, in the company of their fellows, pledge their loyalty to the Fallen?

### *The Zaborshia Observances*

A Soul-Merchant isn't required to involve themselves in the Zaborshia Observances, but participation earns them the favor of the Fallen which is the currency of the realm for obtaining Commissions. In participating, a Soul-Merchant gathers with either a single friendly Soul-Merchant or a gathering. Each participant makes an oath upon their Vassalage of vigilance for threats against the Burning Pit. Those wishing to signal their fitness for future Commissions make oaths of specific action they will take against an enemy of the Burning Pit or a Soul-Merchant who has dropped out of the system. In this way, there is a yearly pogrom against Soul-Merchants who have shown that they are no longer serving their master. The "holiday" also celebrates the first, pseudo-mythical Soul-Merchant to ever try and flee their Commission, Zaborshia. Her fate was to be a diversion for the Fallen, passed between them, lost in games in chance, or stolen out of jealousy. The Fallen covet Zaborshia because they reserve the greatest torments in their arsenal against her. Her suffering has not seen an equal since the Fallen wallowed in fire, blind and alone. This is a lesson very much worth observing with some regularity.

### **The Fallen**

No one knows how long the Fallen writhed in the Lake of Fire, but when they emerged from its heat, none of their original goodness remained. In their ascent through the Burning Pit, they became stupefyingly powerful. In blessing their children, they forged an empire of pure malice that scourged a million worlds. Although Soul-Merchants consider themselves to be the children of the Fallen, whom they essentially regard as gods, while the Fallen clearly see Soul-Merchants as being more like their own excrement and treat them accordingly. Therefore, Soul-Merchants slavishly serve the Fallen in an attempt to avoid their casual and often random acts of supernatural sadism.

### **Cacotrope ("The Devourer of Maladies")**

Pronounced: Cake-O-Trope

Not much is known about Cacotrope except that she betrayed her own people to the Great Primal Evil for some forgotten purpose. When everything was over, Cacotrope was given great rewards: special degradations engineered to turn her into a weapon. The Primal Evil's personal brand of evil is unfathomable, for Cacotrope was clearly crafted as a vessel for her own vengeance upon the Evil itself. It is as if a master swordsmith had given his greatest enemy his finest quality blade. Perhaps this is the greatest torture of all, for when the Great Primal Evil left the Pit to molest the cosmos, it deprived Cacotrope of her purpose. Because the Fallen are bound to the Pit, they can never accost their tormentor. Her particular brand of evil can best be described as punishing offenses against herself far out of scope to the injury she

receives. Those who annoy her can expect to be flayed. If she finds your True Form to be trite, she might grind your True Form into a powder and, still retaining sentience, pour you into the Lake of Fire. This is a very seductive evil, for the punishing of wickedness or vice, regardless of circumstance, never seems unjustified.

Cacotrope is a true shape-shifter. She can appear as a bubbling shadow or a woman-faced dragon made of quartz. She possesses a rib from the Vanquished Valafar, which she treats as a child. It gives her a single-mindedness of purpose, not unlike that of Valafar, which makes her immune to all outside influences, including those that would tell her that the rib is not a child at all.

### *Vassals of Cacotrope*

Vengeance is found wherever there are individuals. When a worthy Soul is so downtrodden that they have no justice, they might take even a demon's justice. Cacotrope sells herself, and therefore, each of her Vassals, as an "Eater of Maladies". This is one of those double meanings Soul-Merchants are so fond of. It may be that Cacotrope "eats" maladies, or in other words, she makes bad situations disappear. Alternately, it could mean "eating thing that is of or related to maladies". Both are appropriate because Vassals of Cacotrope seek out the shittiest of situations as a matter of business opportunity. Poor people always have a sob story and they often look for authority figures to follow. Vassals of Cacotrope also cater to the high society; it has plenty of paranoid delusionals, vengeful primadonnas, and jealous low-born nobles. Actually, it turns out damn near everyone has a sob story. It just so happens that poor people more often than not beg for the privilege of being exploited. Sometimes a lowly serf or nameless bum purifies their spirit and thus primes themselves for Nectar production. Sometimes a girl who was raised by animals wants revenge against poachers. Sometimes a factory worker wants his supervisor thrown into a machine. Sometimes a man gets so full of evil that he cannot accomplish the task of killing off his "enemies list" without Infernal aid. When these things happen, a Vassal of Cacotrope is certainly nearby, waiting to exploit the lot. Consequently, they run in needful circles, ready to eat any misfortune.

### *The Story of Cacotrope and the Monk*

In the upper rings of the Burning Pit, Cacotrope was said to have met an inoffensive monk. So inoffensive was he, that even Cacotrope herself could not find fault with the man. She thought to admonish him for being in her way and then kill him, but he plainly was not in the way. He was presentable, as well, and well kept. He meditated in the Pit because it was such a terrible place in which to find peace. Cacotrope could not begrudge his presence here; he had a right to be there as anyone.

As she walked away from the monk, she nodded to him approvingly and ate a candied flower. She then conjured a legion of Fiends to consume the monk. His fatal mistake: Because he had nothing for Cacotrope to take offense against, his very inoffensiveness became an unforgivable insult.

### **Ororgorolestes ("The Terrible One")**

Pronounced: Aw-Roar-Gore-O-Lest-Ease

It is said that the Great Primal Evil chose to make Ororgorolestes one of the Fallen in punishment, not for opposing it, but for the privilege of being the person who least deserved such treatment. It is not said how the Great Primal Evil came to this conclusion, but presumably, it is able to determine the point of maximum wrongness in all its deeds. This one was particularly foul, for the result was Ororgorolestes, who is arguably supreme among the

Fallen. The Great Primal Evil heaped great gouts of liquid sin into this victim, such that, more than any, Ororgorolestes resembled his maker. He looked not at all as he had before. He was a great horned thing, rippling with masculine energy, and full of contempt. It is the personality trait that most defines the being; he has seen that he is the supreme one, greater even than death, for he has no evidence that any greater exists. He despises those things beneath him: essentially, every living thing. In this way, his existence is a bad thing for everyone. He is, in some ways, the being most attuned to the Burning Pit. Although the Lake of Fire pained him greatly, he was never broken by it. He ate deeply of forbidden things and polluted himself with the worst of the upper rings. The process made him an infernal god bloated on power: power directed towards those least able to defend. If the word villain still has meaning, it applies here.

His name is most difficult to pronounce. Rendered into its mortal form, he is called Ororgorolestes or the Terrible One for those who cannot pronounce the “simplified” form. Even Soul-Merchants, in their mortal Incarnations, have difficulty with this most mouthy of title. When calling upon his Fruits of the Fallen, many stumble. His power is an elegant and refined one. It is not meant for the dabbler. It is not intended to aid the weak. It means to empower those who are themselves already so empowered. Ororgorolestes is the Fallen who grants supernatural might to those unsatisfied with worldly power. He is like the plague that leaves the fields unplowed. He is like a dragon. He breaks all limits. This is what attracts mortals so readily to him: they can feel their innate limitation and seek to surpass it. Many hit their limit and maintain it for a time. Rebellions, both internal and external, are simply a part of human existence. Ororgorolestes liberates mortals from this weakness. For the wealthy, he provides a new definition for ‘opulence’ (stolen, no doubt, from the already dispossessed). For the powerful, he grants perfect information of those who move against them (at the expense of legitimate challenge). For the beautiful, he crafts a destiny that will catapult them into legend (hedging out, no doubt, more worthy candidates). Culture at large suffers for his bounty. His blessings are always at the expense of someone more deserving, which, it seems obviously, makes it wrong both to give and to receive such a blessing. Ororgorolestes carries the Blade of Biforis, a four-story tall blade of fire-blackened bone. It is a testament to his strength that he can wield such a thing. Indeed, legends of the Ascent of the Fallen reference his overwhelming physical power with some frequency.

### *Vassals of Ororgorolestes*

It is interesting to note that to attack is the surest defense. This creates an atmosphere where individuals feel compelled to attack, requiring the need for an even greater escalation to ensure a proper “defense”. Vassals of Ororgorolestes are essentially the greatest mercenary force in existence, for they provide the surest and purest defense: raw power. Every Vassal of the Terrible One is a power broker in the most literal of senses. Their commodity is leverage. Vassals of Ororgorolestes are a rarefied breed in the sense that everyone wants to serve under him. This is because his Commissions are easiest to fill with Truly Wicked Souls which are rarer and therefore worth more than a Purified Soul. However, he is the pickiest when it comes to give out Commissions and he only takes Soul-Merchants in good standing. If you’ve been cast into the Lake of Fire by one of the other Fallen, you are not getting a Commission with the Terrible One. The gift of the Terrible One is worldly power, which is ultimately the most common thing that drives people into the arms of the Infernal Diaspora. The multitude of worlds are host to a thousand rebellions, upheavals, depressions, and personal vendettas apiece, many of which have Souls of value embroiled in them.

### *The Story of the Priests of Ororgorolestes*

Soul-Merchants have a little joke. If someone is doing something that will end in failure, they are said to be “Priests of Ororgorolestes” (a fool). This refers to a story of obscure origins

but often repeated in relation to the popular phrase. The story says that a group of occultists once found themselves stranded in the Burning Pit. Being clever, and knowing of the Pit's inhabitants, they attempted to ally with Ororgorolestes by becoming his "Priests". They sacrificed Imps in his name, difficult though it is to intone. Soul-Merchants found them amusing, but not dangerous enough to flay. By calling the name of the Terrible One, however, they had drawn his dire attention. Far from being flattered, he was insulted. They said he was holy when he was plainly not. They gave to him the least of sacrifices. And, worse of all, they understood nothing of his nature. He killed them with the Blade of the Biforis, of course (it was a foregone conclusion), but he did so using only the flat of his terrible blade. No blood was spilled by the attack. The offenders were rendered into a kind of paste, unworthy of being cut.

### **Vil ("Corruption Incarnate")**

Pronounced: Vill

Vil had been a wise man or magician of some sort. As a wandering mystic, he dispensed the Simple Good's wisdom and organized great heroes to assault the Great Primal Evil. When everything shook out, the wizard had been broken and remade as a guru of sin. He enjoyed his tortures in the Lake of Fire, becoming a kind of demon-bodhisattva. Its will is insidious. Vil is a being incarnated in black magic and forbidden wisdom. It is faith lost in the pursuit of knowledge, and It is most certainly infectious. This once-broken wise-man has since become a force of nature. It has betrayed many of its allies and reappropriated their treasures and blessings. Vil has stolen the face of more beings than It can remember. It has plundered untold countless worlds, sapping them of their vital goodness and then casting them into the void. Through Its Vassals, it collected the best, both spiritual and material, from every world touched by the Pit. One might be tempted say that Vil is the most powerful of the Fallen, but appearances can be deceiving. The current state of the Burning Pit, with its faded glories, is almost certainly due to Vil's gentle steering of Soul-Merchant society. It just so happens that everything Vil touches turns to fetid shit.

#### *Vassals of Vil*

Vassals of Vil attempt to spread a belief that all Sorcery has been tainted by the Fallen. This serves to keep mortals away from Sorcery in the hopes that they won't discover Greater Workings capable of annihilating or trapping a Soul-Merchant's Incarnation. They don't mention Vil by name, but they all but utter the syllable. Some Vassals of Vil genuinely believe that Sorcery is actually a form of evil and do not need to lie about such things. Do not write off such notions as grandiose; Vil is cosmic corruption. Ultimately, Vil is a god of knowledge. Like knowledge, however, inviting Vil into your mind may permanently change your point of view. It is hard to say if this is a natural thing or if Vil truly is as corrosive as legend suggests. Vil grants any knowable information as well as perspectives. It can grant artificial enlightenment to seekers of truth. It can give a sense of happiness throughout one's days. It can even give you a set of joyful memories that never actually happened. Of course, Vil's gifts come at a steep price, paid in full at the end of a Soul-Merchant's Commission.

#### *The Story of Vil and Raum's Wager*

The Fallen never made friendships, but Vil and Raum had a great debate going between them. The matter itself isn't important. It may have something to do with Raum's relatively weak array of powers, but the specifics are lost. The point is that Vil promised to reveal the truth of the matter once and for all and devised a method of doing so. He then proposed a wager: If he was wrong, he would grant Raum all of his powers eternally. If he was right, he could borrow Raum's indestructibility for a fraction of a second at a time of his choosing. Raum, convinced of his own wits, agreed to the wager. Tens of thousands of years later, invaders, called the

Imperial Republic of Crystal and Lightning, used a gateway to find their way into the Pit. Vil used a spell to seal the gateway. To prevent the Imperial Republic from simply opening it again, he threw the bound form of Raum into the portal at its exact moment of closing. Vil took this opportunity to borrow Raum's invulnerability. When he tried to give it back, Raum was nowhere to be found so he gave the permanence to his sorcerous seal on the invader's gateway. Raum died not remembering the wager made so long ago when the Fruits were fresh and new.

### **Zeevuv ("The Swarming Carcass")**

Pronounced: Zee-Vuv

Zeevuv was once a shining eagle of gold with wings so large as to eclipse the sun. It battled the aerial horrors of the Great Primal Evil and with great success. Having gained the attention of Evil itself, Zeevuv was gutted and had its entrails stirred across the ground. The Evil would not, however, let the noble bird simply die. It had been granted the gift of life eternal. The Great Primal Evil drooled its sin-infused saliva into its guts, which rotted and convulsed. Insects took up residence in its body cavity and colonies of vermin ate its never-dying flesh. It was cast into the Lake of Fire where the scouring heat seared away its feathers. The insects within its gut evolved into forms resistant to heat and therefore multiplied. When it escaped the Lake of Fire, it acquired new species of things to nurture in its flesh. It made gardens of its own innards, feeding the swarming mass with captured Imps. Zeevuv's flesh teemed with life, but wherever it passed, all life seemed to die. You can still trace its limping passage through the rings of the Burning Pit, for there is a single lone stripe where no plant will grow, no blood will soak, and no magma will settle. It is clear that death has traveled there.

Through its travels and blessings, Zeevuv became the Soul-Merchant god of death. Soul-Merchants do not view mortality as mortals do. They perceive death as a useful element of their profession. Death releases a Soul for harvest. It is death that opens a Soul-Merchant's Maw to collect their bounty. Death drives men into the arms of Soul-Merchants, for mortals invest an incalculable amount of energy trying to cheat or ignore their own demise. Zeevuv grants gifts of the flesh; extended life, extended youth, physical perfection, and sexual satisfaction. To beings made of meat, these commodities sell themselves. A Soul-Merchant Vassal of Zeevuv merely need act as a middleman in the exchange.

#### *Vassals of Zeevuv*

Vassals of Zeevuv need not be tempters par excellence like their more heavy-handed brethren. They are selling a product that needs no salesman: life, pleasure, and health. These things comprise the barest elements of 'goodness', stripped off all outside abstraction. Mortals, therefore, who desire to lead good lives will seek out those sources who can provide these things. It just so happens that Soul-Merchants supply all of these commodities to those they deem worthy. The price, obviously, is the Soul, but for some, the price is well worth it. The one catch is simple; a Soul-Merchant cannot offer more life than the remainder of their Commission. The trick, then, is to call in the debt without resorting to lying or slaughtering. There is no shame in deception and no harm in employing cronies, of course. Vassals of Zeevuv are the Soul-Merchants most likely to be the center of a cult. Such cults are the leading symptom of a dying and decadent culture, self-absorbed to the point of nihilism. True Wickedness can blossom to its fullest extent in this environment and consequently Vassals of Zeevuv can compete with Vassals of Ororgolestes to collect these rarities.

#### *The Story of the Serpent and the Staff*

In one of its more avian moments, Zeevuv was said to have chased a serpent of purple sapphires up a tree. Fearing the clouds of stinging insects that diffused from within the guts

of the thing, it retreated to a long and study branch. Of course, Zeevuv trailed behind and eventually captured the creature. It clung to the branch tightly and when Zeevuv retrieved the snake it broke off. Zeevuv liked this configuration so much he inflicted the snake with rigor-mortis and used the branch as a staff when he walked like a man. The object was a wonder: the Serpent had Zeevuv's knowledge of mortality. Sometimes, Zeevuv would loan the artifact to an especially loyal Vassal for their Incarnation, giving them forbidden knowledge of medicine with which to birth living blasphemies. Alas, nothing in this or any world is truly permanent. The earthquake Xaphan once arrived a few seconds early. It caught Zeevuv by surprise and it dropped the staff into the Lake of Fire. Many have claimed to have retrieved the Serpent and the Staff, but no one has yet "brought forth the body" so to speak. As far as anyone knows it might be in the process of being sexually explored by an Imp.

### **The Vanquished**

Not all of the Fallen that have existed still exist. In fact, most of them have perished, turned to dust or burned to nothingness. The memory of Soul-Merchant society, vast though it is, may not even recount all of the Vanquished. It may very well be the case that the circumstances of the upper rings of the Pit caused one or many of them to perish bodily as well as within the memory. Pieces of the remains of the Vanquished are now prized artifacts amongst Soul-Merchants, passed between collectors as fortunes wax and wane.

### **Valafar ("Irresistible Terror")**

Pronounced: Va-La-Far

Valafar had been a champion of the people, a knighted warrior of some sort. Corrupted by the Great Primal Evil without supernatural influence, he turned on his people and exterminated them. For his troubles, the Evil cast him into a Lake of Fire to meditate on how he has betrayed his people and then been, himself, utterly betrayed. Terrible things oozed from his skin. He gave in to the fire and let it free him from his suffering. By an act of will, he surrendered himself to death, becoming the first of his kind to do so. His bones helped the Fallen escape the Lake of Fire. Cacotrope retains one of his ribs, which she treats as a child.

### **Biforis ("The Trodden")**

Pronounced: Beh-For-Iss

Originally Biforis had been a noble steed of some sort, but it had been transformed into something retaining elephantine and ogre features. Biforis is known for being slain by his fellows while they dwelt in the Lake of Fire. They used his body to climb out of the Lake of Fire and into the upper reaches. He is invoked in their journey several times since Orogorolestes wields Biforis's weapon, which he stole from the corpse. Biforis must have been quite large, as attested both by his blade and his ability to free the Fallen from eternal fire. Presumably, he would have been able to simply hoist his fellows to safety. Clearly he was unwilling to do so, and was murdered for his sloth.

### **Earnsaxa ("The Forbidden One")**

Pronounced: Irn-Saxa

There once was a high-born woman who went to battle with the Great Primal Evil in the guise of a man. When her people were kneaded into the ground, the Great Primal Evil exposed her dishonesty and displayed her naked, skinless form to all who still had eyes. When cast into the abyss of fire, her viscera was charred into blacked smithereens. When she emerged from the Lake of Fire, she could not recognize her own reflection: her skin sprouted serrated spines.

In the ascent through the Pit, Earnsaxa indulged in the cursed fruits that blossom in the upper corridors. She mated with a number of geological features which retain terrible curses to this day. Among the Fallen, only she was brave enough to eat from a certain tree. It gave her tremendous power and she became preeminent among the Fallen. She gave herself titles such as “Executrix of the Fallen” and “Queen of All Hellfire”. Alas, the very fruits that propelled her into greatness eventually cursed and weakened her. It gradually robbed her of strength until she dissolved into nothingness. The Fallen Vil stole her curse in such a way as to avoid being weakened as she was. She had already paid the price for the blessing of the fruit. Earnsaxa existed in the time of the Soul-Merchants and gathered many Nectars from them.

### **Nergal (“Secret Dooms”)**

Pronounced: Ner-Gall

Nergal had once been the greatest warrior of his people, a race of beardless forest dwellers. He was made to watch with lidless eyes as his homeland was reduced to a mere pyre. When he first stepped out of the Lake of Fire, Nergal was inspired by the vastness of the world. The sky held nothing at all, but the undefined space in-between gave him knowledge of a spell. Nergal built a great gate and crushed a handful of Imps upon the activation altars. The gate opened to a different world entirely. It was a sleepy utopia. Nergal thought to enter and dominate it, but in leaving the Burning Pit, he turned to ash. Nergal had not seen his own secret doom. Nergal’s Gate would become useful later by Soul-Merchants, but they were useless for the Fallen. The Fallen have stolen Nergal’s secrets and all four can send Soul-Merchants on Commission. Nergal did not survive to see the ultimate use of his inspiration.

### **Raum (“Jealous Monster”)**

Pronounced: Rowh-Em (rhymes with “Wow ‘Em”)

Raum had been the champion of a subteranean mining people, proud of their endurance and crafts. He gain preeminence among his people as the greatest champion and for this reason, the Great Primal Evil corrupted him terribly and cast him down. Raum had no powers of control, no abilities to change shape. He wasn’t particularly strong or even smart. He was, however, entirely impervious: he acquired this blessing of indestructability at the expense of receiving other blessings. Gifts and curses alike washed over him without effect. For this reason, he was eternally jealous and became a problem for the other Fallen. When the Imperial Republic of Crystal and Lightning’s first scouts created a portal to the Burning Pit, they sealed the rift with Raum’s body and closed it upon him. The seal retained poor Raum’s permanence. Raum did not.

### **Chalisdharma (“The Father of Fiends”)**

Pronounced: Kal-Iss-Dar-Mah

Chalisdharma was not an evil man before becoming Fallen, for his greatest deed was taking up arms against the Great Primal Evil. He was a violent man, though, and did not hesitate in any way to slay. If his own men showed cowardice in their eyes, he could carve out their heart and feed it to his dogs. There was certainly a darkness in him. The Great Primal Evil liked this aspect of the man. When his form was cast, filled beyond saturation point with the essences of sin, into the Lake of Fire, he was not at all like he had been. He had become a monstrous thing, the template from which Fiends would later be drawn. Indeed, when the Fallen escaped the fire and made sport of the lives of Imps, the Fiends that resulted looked to Chalisdharma as their master. Something about him subjugated the lust for violence felt by Fiends.

Ultimately, he was undone by Zeevuv, who enacted a conspiracy which doomed Chalidharma. It ended with Chalidharma thrown into an oubliette filled with ravenous Fiends, trained to hunger for his flesh. Those Fiends who ate of his flesh become incredibly powerful warriors and were prizes to be won in the manipulations of Soul-Merchants. Some few later became Soul-Merchants themselves, although arising from such origins carries no honor.

### **Xaphan (“The Shaking of the Land”)**

Pronounced: Zah-Fan

Xaphan had once been a prince of long-lived oak trees, sown by the Simple Good itself. He had sought to oppose the Great Primal Evil on the grounds that it would corrupt nature itself. This capability was later proven with dramatic flare when the Evil captured Xaphan and petrified his xylem with molten stone. The Lake of Fire was particularly traumatizing to Xaphan whose form never cooled from the fires. His body forever after gave off billows of black smoke. Earnsaxa, when she was Queen of All Hellfire, was displeased by Xaphan one day and summoned a horde of Imps who devoured Xaphan right down to the smithereens that never die out. She thought she had seen the last of Xaphan, and in a way it was the last time he was seen. However, every seventeen hours a great earthquake strikes the Burning Pit. It completely levels the lower rungs, which are later cleared away by Fiends and Imps. Xaphan had always blessed the Soul-Merchants, for they had once served him, and thus, the earthquake did not harm Soul-Merchants in good standing or their Estates. The Fallen, and their wondrous works of infernal art, are shaken to the roots, though. This is because the earthquake is the rage of Xaphan. Though Earnsaxa, the Forbidden One, is long gone, his rage refuses to rest. His refusal to lay down constantly churns up any infrastructure in the Pit so there is little of it other than ruins and temporary measures.

### **Geography of the Burning Pit**

#### **The Lake of Fire**

At the bottom of the Burning Pit lies a massive sea of liquid fire. It is the most horrid stuff imaginable. It forces its way through every orifice. It drowns while it burns and fills bellies, bowels, and eyesockets. The worst part is of course the blindness, for one could otherwise scale the walls and find a way out. The Lake of Fire holds its contents prisoner most effectively, for the walls of the place are incalculably high. They get higher all the time in fact, as the Lake of Fire burns its way through the stone below. In its travels, it encounters pockets of combustible material and sends fire up through the Pit itself, tormenting the creatures in the lowest levels of the Pit. Fiends and Soul-Merchants obsess over their time spent in the Lake of Fire. Their art, culture, and rituals imitate the landscape from which they emerged. Imps don't understand language, but they seem to understand when someone refers to the Lake of Fire. It is the threat levied at all Soul-Merchants disloyal to the Fallen: fail or rebel, and you shall spend another eon in agony.

The Lake is perhaps the most dominant feature of the entire place; even the highest levels are scorched by the dry, unending heat of it. Consequently, everything placed over the central open space will be instantly incinerated by the rising mixture of air and plasma. Ultimately, the only way out of the Lake of Fire is to be elevated out of it by the Fallen. Once thrown into the Lake, a Soul-Merchant can expect leniency only when one of the Fallen feel they need more slaves to reap them a tithe of Nectars. The waiting list is heart-crushingly long, sadly, so one can expect a stay there measured in the tens or hundreds of thousands of years. Once emerged, Soul-Merchants are generally filled with an uncontrollable urge to placate their punishers with the greatest of obsequy. When faced with what is, certainly, the worst torments conceivable, how could one not want to simply get on with their life no matter what degradations await?



## **Infernal Estates**

There are ten layers in the Burning Pit permitted to Soul-Merchants, with the upper eschelons reserved for the favorites of the Fallen. Consequently, at the upper levels, the inhabitants get a bit more fervent in their partisan support for whoever they are currently the Vassal of. Having an Estate on a higher rung in the Pit is a status symbol. It shows that you've paid your dues and that you have pleased your masters. However, higher positions also make one a target, especially when Incarnated. Those at the bottom are far more likely to unite against someone with a higher Estate than they are to unite against one another. Many Soul-Merchants employ residences or Nectar factories in multiple neighborhoods.

A Soul-Merchant's Estate should reflect their personal aesthetic. If the Soul-Merchant's True Form is an abstract form made of riveted iron, then it is likely that its Estate will have a jagged, industrial feel. Such places are not made for human passage. It assumes a certain elevation. Estates are also limited by the (sometimes bizarre) limitations of their setting. Estates provide a number of functions. They are a location for Soul-Merchants to gather in a social fashion. Hosting parties gives you prestige and opens you up to alliances. They are a place to bind Souls and subject them to horrible illusions. Estates are tied to the Soul-Merchant's particular brand of evil, and it allows the Soul-Merchant to force sensations upon captive Souls. They can create whatever illusion in the minds of Souls they think would produce the most interesting Nectar of Suffering. The Nectars accumulate in a specially designated structure called the Font. Soul-Merchants can harvest it themselves or it may be hoarded away behind an elaborate and devilish array of traps and curses. Usually, the Nectars are a dark red or purple liquid with an acidic green sheen. Nectar produced in certain locations is permeated with a flavor or emotion associated with that location.

## **Nikchod (21st Rung: The Acidic Cloud)**

At the heart of Nikchod lies a telescopic sphincter made rusted iron. Five times daily, it produces an acidic vapor which, for a few hours, turns the neighborhood a sickly olive green color. While enveloped in clouds of this acid, a Soul-Merchant in good standing will not come to harm, no matter what their substance. However, Fiends and Imps collect droplets of acid which render the poor creature into an ooze. Nikchod has a utilitarian charm and plentiful iron which attracts Soul-Merchants who craft. The fires of the Belching Conflagration sometimes reach here and the rains burns with fire and acid alike. Nikchod produces a very tart Nectar of Suffering, with rapturous waves of tactile pleasure (the opposite of being vaporized by acidic fires).

## **Vrumderem (22nd Rung: The Scorpion Hives)**

A series of ceramic pipes converge and separate along the thoroughfare of Vrumderem. These pipes vibrate with a specific sound: vrmdrm, or Vrumderem, the name given to this region. The sound is the scuttling of a million scorpions ranging in size from that of a pinhead to the size of a cat. The scorpions secrete the ceramic that makes up the pipes and they build them with dizzying speed. Consequently, to move about in this region, you'll likely have to break some of the piping, an act which enrages all nearby scorpions. Soul-Merchants in good standing with the Fallen need not fear these hazards, however. The seasonal rains of fire here are most mild. The region does also house the premiere Fiend bloodsport arena. Vassals of Zeevuv run the betting, which takes place with Nectars and fine Souls. The pain-factories nearby produce draughts of Nectars which gives its imbibers a sensation of being stung by heroin-bees.

## **Agonosithra (23rd Rung: The Stairs That Lead Nowhere)**

To those not permitted to dwell at this level, Agonosithra is a doom that brings isolation,

madness, and finally, suicide. The region's borders are unclear, for within, it ignores the laws of space. The main feature of this place is a series of stairs which lead up and down endlessly, looping back in on itself, often defying notions of "up" and "down". If you are not supposed to be here, the stairs lead nowhere and lock you in a loop from which there is no escape, save a pillar deep violet fire which seems to lie at the bottom of every staircase. The only escape from Agonosithra is flinging oneself into the pillar, which exits into the Lake of Fire. The experience of being in the pillar of fire is a unique horror of the Burning Pit, for it is not a physical torment, but rather, a simulation of deep personal trauma. Agonosithra is the chosen dwelling of many up-and-coming Soul-Merchants, especially those serving Vil. The Belching Conflagration does not reach Agonosithra. Because of the pervasive feeling of suicidal desperation, the Nectars of Suffering produced here have a wondrous, life affirming tinge to them.

### **Hamphroisayus (24th Rung: The Sulfurous Lovers)**

Hamphroisayus is the form of two giant lovers, stretched to form an entire layer of the Pit. Their forms are twisted upon each other and Soul-Merchants make their Estates upon the folds of their flesh. Their skin exudes sulfur, disgusting the lovers who are held so taut that they cannot move at all. The feeling of revulsion here is particularly potent and lends a certain tanginess to the Nectars of Suffering produced here, like freshly falling in love. An allied collective of Soul-Merchants, called the Heartbreak Factory, operates out of Hamphroisayus. Their specialty is seducing Souls and crafting illusions only to reveal the truth later. The trick is in fooling the Soul to believing the illusion again. It might take a lifetime, but the Heartbreak Factory has enough members to constantly break the Souls until they offer no resistance at all. There is also a number of forums in Hamphroisayus where Soul-Merchant poetry is read in the Old Tongue of the Great Primal Evil.

### **Nevrad (25th Rung: The Rats of Gold)**

Here, fields of fermented grain steam while rats glean the seeds. The vermin are so plentiful here that they routinely overcome Fiends and pick their bones clean. In their drunkenness, the rats convulse and rut. However, they never attack Soul-Merchants in good standing and they always make gathering gold a priority. This is because one out of every million seeds of the rotting grain is made entirely of gold. The rats fight bitterly over possession of it. They often hide large caches of gold in holes they have dug or in the cracks of Soul-Merchant Estates. Soul-Merchants can easily collect these caches of gold for their own artistic or economic use. Many Soul-Merchants here make True Forms that give off poisonous or anesthetizing gases which leave trails of rats laid belly up. The Nectars of Suffering produced in Nevrad have a pleasurable gustatory sensation and a sense of cuteness about it, rather like unto a cupcake or other adorable confection. The opposite of being eaten by a horde of drunken rats?

### **Geddelont (26th Rung: The Forest of Sinner's Limbs)**

Geddelont is a holy place of an obscure heresy Soul-Merchants have perpetrated on mortals for some time. It claims that a debt of flesh, such as a left arm or right foot, would pave one's way into the afterlife. The worst deviants and tyrants found salvation in liberating their limbs to settle the debt. These limbs collect in Geddelont and arrange themselves like trees in a forest of limbs. It is here that many Soul-Merchants make Estates for the purpose of punishing Truly Wicked Souls. The Nectars made from those particular Souls are most sweet when made in Geddelont; they resonate with unrepentant evils too numerous and too depressing to catalog. However, the arms of all Truly Wicked Souls rendered in this region taken by the place as a sacrifice to Geddelont. Other tortures await the rest of the poor bastard. Every other inch of the sinner is made to suffer to the extent that it can. Many Soul-Merchants give up on progressing higher than Geddelont and consequently learn specialties to earn a little extra Nectars for themselves. If the Burning Pit could be said to have prostitution, it would be in Geddelont,

where for a few drops of Nectar, you can debase and be debased by (they acts are functionally identical as far as Soul-Merchants are concerned) one of your fellow Soul-Merchants. A fair price for a moment of what passes for companionship among devils.

### **Jukroien (27th Rung: The Godskull)**

This entire ring is made of fragments of the skull of some godlike being. The Soul-Merchants call it Jukroien, "Godskull". The various shards of bone jut out of the wall at bizarre angles and most of them have been hollowed out and turned into dwelling places. Now, they are filled with pain-factories and ballrooms. The bone regenerates slowly except where it comes in contact with the ectoplasm of Souls. The material of the fragment pulls Souls into itself, embedding them halfway into a wall or floor. The Nectars made here have a sense of completion and accomplishment to them. Jukroien is home to a number of opera houses. Soul-Merchant opera is essentially a symphony performed by Souls set to the backdrop of a Soul actually being tortured by a Soul-Merchant. The Nectars of the performance are distributed amongst the audience during intermissions and then at the show's completion. The Godskull is also renowned for its galleries. Soul-Merchants work in a number of mediums but predictably, it is their work with Souls that is most noteworthy. Turning a Soul into a Masterpiece is at once more difficult and more rewarding than you would initially suspect. Each life is itself unique and the circumstances under which a person becomes primed for harvest by Soul-Merchants is itself interesting. It is the artist's duty, therefore, as a crafter of Souls, to render the circumstances of that life upon the very material of that being's Soul for all to see. In the viewing and pitying of such Masterpieces, it decants Nectars of its own unique Suffering for the enjoyment of gawkers.

### **Maggiddhemosh (28th Rung: The Rains of Blood-Wine)**

This region smells of caramel and grape. The name of the place was clearly not meant for mortal tongues; pronounced 'Ma-Gid-Eh-Mawsh'. For some reason, the dripping juices of many fruits from higher rings filter down to this specific layer. Therefore it rains sweet berry wine whenever the earthquake Xaphan strikes the Pit. The wine is, of course, tainted with mortal blood and carries a curse. It causes a fatal rotting which even distorts and dismantles inorganic Soul-Merchants. Only the holders of Estates in this region have permission to drink the fallen dregs without suffering the terrible curse. The Dregs of Maggiddhemosh are therefore a terrible poison exported to all levels of the Pit (and perhaps a few drops have made their way into other places). Nectars made here are predictably fruity, but the blood seems to be the more dominant theme.

### **Trigillos (29th Rung: The Halls of Extinction)**

The fire in Trigillos is mostly tame, relegated to fountains. Lava and tar flows are mixed to produce decorative lavas and designer igneous rock. It is from these custom-made granites that the Halls of Extinction are constructed. The great hall winds its way through Trigillos, the 29th Rung, lined with displays of creatures and cultures from extinct worlds and time-periods. Each culture represented is shown in a culturally appropriate diorama, with Souls forced to pantomime the same vignette eternally. It is a celebration of Soul-Merchants' immortality and a thumbing of the nose at the pitiful lot of Gravedust. The Nectars made here smack of pride and age old culture; this, no doubt, is the inverse of the despair and futility experienced by the Souls imprisoned within. Soul-Merchants should consider themselves lucky to have an Estate in Trigillos, for the Halls of Extinction are far spatially larger than would otherwise seem reasonable. Consequently, Estates here are hidden behind certain doors in the Halls known only to Soul-Merchants authorized to sojourn in those places. Once inside, one finds stupefyingly vast caverns which could house several villages by themselves (if such things existed in the Burning Pit; they don't).

### **Eed (30th Rung: The Garden of Smolders)**

Eed is a place of alien beauty, a garden with no plants. Lava tubes here grow very much in the manner of thorny, smoldering brush. If they are pruned by a skilled Soul-Merchant, they can grow into beautiful topiary that glow with inner heat. They even yield a kind of fruit: an ore that never fully cools. Those who work it will bear scars from its cursed smithereens, but the result is always a thing of infernal glory. There are very few Estates in Eed and those who have them eventually lose their leases, often in ways that are technically “unfair”. The competent and kiss-ass alike are inevitably cast back into Trigillos for a few thousand years or so. Sometimes utterly incompetent Soul-Merchants are given Estates in Eed to increase their profile for the purposes of humiliating them when they do not live up to the honor. They must wear their weakness proudly or else be cast into the Lake of Fire for a lack of good humor. Eed is not home to nameless pain-factories. Each Estate produces a product line of Nectars. Some of the most acclaimed vintages come from the charnel chateau of Eed, traditional blends of torture which have been prepared in the ancient method. These have names suggesting the breed of torture the Nectar was wrought from such as the Merry Maggot, Soma of Innocent Heartbreak, and Essence of Lascivious Agonies.

### **The Forbidden Rings**

The Fallen are jealous creatures. No Soul-Merchant is permitted to dwell beyond the Garden of Smolders, Eed, unless summoned. No Soul-Merchants have ever been summoned in this fashion. They use sorcery to steal away any tribute they might be owed and communicate with their servants via shared thought. Such an experience is excruciatingly painful, so no Soul-Merchant would willingly speak to their master for longer than absolutely necessary. Legend tells of the Fallen and their explorations of the Pit's upper reaches. We know there are vast alien gardens of various substances, forests of fruit trees (most, if not all, of which are cursed). There are unique living things, presumably a property of the place itself, which live in various regions. Stories tell of talking animals, people of iconic professions, and other figures fit for morality tales. One must assume that they, like most of the properties of the Burning Pit, were engineered by the Great Primal evil to inflict maximum suffering and angst. The very pinnacle of the Pit is the Cells of the Fallen, where the Dire Four lair. Soul-Merchants see very little of these places and speak less of what they have found there.

### **Fruits of the Fallen**

The Fruits of the Fallen are, morally and metaphysically speaking, quite complex. It is unclear the extent to which they draw directly from the Fallen. Clearly, even the Vanquished are a source of its power. It may in fact be draw upon the Great Primal Evil or some dregs of its stupendous potency. Indeed, there is reason to believe that this is the case: like the Primal Evil, it creates instill supernatural evil in all it touches. It might be tempting to call this practice infernalism instead of sorcery, as if gifted only by an unholy pact. The reality is that it is a practice which can be taken up by any who come upon it knowledge. It is true that many mortals have bargained their possessions and souls for the secrets of the Fallen. Few have divulged these secrets without having been given leave to do so. More often, initiation is given only by Soul-Merchants. Only a fool would steal these secrets. Indeed, to activate many of the Fallen's Dire Rituals, one must either be a Soul-Merchant himself or have knowledge of their most secret rites. For instance, how can one participate in the Black Masses if one is not included? There is, however, a class of people, known as Warlocks, who are permitted to initiate into the Fruits of the Fallen. Such individuals are permitted to take part in Soul-Merchant rites, but are treated in such proceedings as the Soul-Merchant's familiar or other intelligent pet.

It is true that an overwhelming majority of Soul-Merchant Incarnations begin with initiation into the Fruits of the Fallen. Very few eschew the Fruits willingly. Sometimes a Soul-Merchant will

simply fail in the craftsmanship of their form and initiation won't take. Such poor devils will have to bargain for initiation or else dominate the mundane world completely to compensate. Since a majority of Soul-Merchants use the Fruits of the Fallen, there are a lot of Soul-Merchants out there generating a great deal of supernatural evil. This substance has variously been described as "liquid sin", "clinging curses", or most often "Malefaction". It may be that this is why the metaphysics of various Resource Worlds are becoming more and more hostile to the Infernal Diaspora. It does, on the surface, seem like a very efficient way of spreading one's evil far and wide. Imagine, if you will, thousands of immortals shitting out curses upon the souls of worthless Gravedust and their primitive belongings. This view is given weight by the fact that each world reacts to Malefaction differently. In some places, objects and people infested with it degrade faster. In some places, bad luck follows in its wake. In some primitive worlds, Malefaction manifests as small black curse-fairies. It seems the universe doesn't like Malefaction much.

If the Fruits of the Fallen are a School of Sorcery, then it is certainly one of the most extreme styles. Its Rituals are not for the faint of heart. Even Soul-Merchants cannot often indulge some of its Dire Rituals, for fear of devolving into Fiends. Like all evil, however, its flavors are meant to be savored over a long period of time. The Dire Rituals are to be taken with moderation, but many a bold Vassal of Vil has eschewed all lesser rituals and never been caught without their infernal majesty. Sometimes Soul-Merchants create cults of mortals to aid in their Rituals, providing assistance in worshipping their specific dark master. The Fruits takes some of its power from blasphemy and strife. It provokes others to heights of power born upon a sacrifice of native goodwill. Of course, one could merely derive power from the Burning Pit itself; this technique requires an object as the "gateway" and, sadly, forever makes the object Malefic. As noted, this has various deleterious effects on the objects and those near it.

Performing the Fruits of the Fallen, one assumes, is a morally neutral thing in itself (ignoring any Malefaction it might birth into an otherwise unspoiled world). One can shield themselves from harmful magic or conjure a light to hold back the dark. Although it is certainly a curse (calling upon the final spite of Xaphan) the Fruits can cast a foe to the ground instead of harming them outright. This same curse keeps a Soul within its body so that it can be revived by healers. The Fruits can protect the virtuous just as easily as the it can aid the highest bidder. If one were called to describe the collection of supernatural powers at a Soul-Merchant's bidding, one might describe them as "generous". That is to say, a majority of them aid others. However, if Soul-Merchant wishes to call upon the fires of the Burning Pit itself, they pay a price of blood and pain: the fire burns through the caster first, then to the foes.

### **Notable Soul Merchants**

There are a few thousand Soul-Merchants, but so few are actually in the Burning Pit at any given time. Therefore, most Soul-Merchants know all other Soul-Merchants. They have, after all, had a very long time in which to bump into each other.

#### **Peter the Blasphemer**

Peter made his money by subverting religious factions and gained a reputation for running heresies and cults. Lately, he's been spouting something about a coming "Post-Merchant" time when Soul-Merchants begin to inhabit the upper reaches of the Burning Pit. The real blasphemy comes in when he claims that the Fallen are using the Soul-Merchants to teach them how to redeem themselves and cleanse the taint of the Great Evil. Dangerous territory, indeed. His true form is a twelve-fingered red ape with the head of a fly.

#### **Chogriel and Enikiel**

You don't get a lot of Soul-Merchant duos, but Chogriel and Enikiel are more like a singular executive of a powerful corporation. More and more, they seem to be bonded to one another. Chogriel is a silver sphere which hums and vibrates with hidden power and Enikiel exists as a thread made of spun infants' bones tied to a needle that laughs as it orbits Chogriel. They both favor the female aspect.

### **The Highwayman**

If you ask the Highwayman his name, he will tell you that he has none, for his name was given to him by other Soul-Merchants. Indeed, he is called the Highwayman by his fellows because he continuously cheats, murders, and otherwise shuts down other Soul-Merchants. His specialty is swooping in and signing contracts with mortals after someone else primed them for the Contract, fooling them into thinking he was the demon they were originally planning to sign with. The Highwayman's True Form is blood-soaked traveller with a beard of spines and a manic smile.

### **Boss Number One**

The Boss has a reputation as being the single most skilled diplomat in the Burning Pit. His conspiracies, crafted over the course of decades or centuries, drive armies of men across oceans. He has been known to take students along with him on commissions to show them the Arts of Subversion. His form is an obese blue giant skewered upon swords, which it rocks back and forth across the ground as its means of locomotion.

### **Scratch**

Scratch, or Mister Scratch in some trade hubs, barter knowledge of occult things and the Fruits of the Fallen, doling out snippets of knowledge and worldly riches for those who would deal with him. He takes commissions in a world multiple times (always in service to Vil), a tendency that vexes some Soul-Merchants. Although his Incarnation wanes in power upon its return, he retains his accumulated lore, and thus becomes a keeper of the most forbidden secrets a world can offer. His true form is a seven headed serpent, each with three jeweled eyes. It is knotted in such a way as to make it maddening to behold, for some heads devour the tails of their fellows in a manner that is mathematically impossible.

### **Ura the Farflung**

Ura has been in the game for a very long time. It has served several of the Fallen and Vanquished and made them all very happy in its time with them. Consequently, Ura has tasted many of the Greater Fruits of the Fallen. Ura is also known for its Nectars and it produces a vintage called "Unanticipated Mutilations #3". Its true form is a halo of goat legs surrounding a central eye, flanked with eagle wings of pearl. A great black nail pierces it through its symmetrical center. Favors no gender.

### **Pale Meg**

Pale Meg is known in many Worlds and all of them use her name as an obscenity. "Meg!" they cry. She has a reputation for running a World into the ground and playing it out. She may have more of the "Great Primal Evil" in her than most Soul-Merchants. Her form is a wraith made of gore and locusts that leaves a trail of clots where it passes.

### **Daquiunx (Pronunciation: Da-Kwee-Unks)**

Daquiunx is as rich as her name is unpronounceable. Her palace is called The Temple of Greed for it is made of ten thousand human souls entombed within gold and encrusted in diamonds and emeralds. She has platinum plated dragons (actual dragons) through which is pumped molten sunfire onto mortal souls. Her true form is a leaden hermaphrodite statue with

wings made of falsified records.

### **Hadrenalecht**

Hadrenalecht got stuck in a Tar Pit and spent thirty thousand years there, gathering mortal souls. Eventually, it found a way home with its fat commission. To this day, it doesn't say how it got out. Its form is a serpent of articulated tin engraved with a pictorial essay on how best to extract Nectars of Suffering. It favors neither gender, but spent thirty thousand years as a male.

### **Corvus the Liar**

Corvus has a reputation for making his fortune through lies. As far as anyone knows he has been honest and up front with his fellow Soul Merchant and the Fallen. He has not become a Fiend. When it comes to mortals, though, all bets are off. His true form is a great eyeless head carried by seventy slaves coated with molten gold.

### **Known Resource Worlds**

Soul Merchants are quite mobile in a cosmic sense. The Infernal Diaspora extends into untold hundreds of worlds, many of which have yet to even be recorded. There are, however, a few staple worlds that Soul-Merchants do (or have done) regular commerce in. Few worlds play host to too many Soul-Merchants at any one time. Not only does the presence of competition get really nasty in the 999th year of your commission, but some worlds simply cannot handle the presence of too many Soul-Merchants. Thus, Soul-Merchants as a race frequently refer to themselves as the Infernal Diaspora; a people sojourning away from their own kind.

*Warning:* Conventional wisdom may be multiple thousands of years out of date.

### **The Paragon Industriarchy**

A world of gleaming silver towers and wondrous technological infrastructure. Roads, railroads, and shipping lanes move vast quantities of goods with the pulse of market forces familiar to Soul-Merchants. Highly civilized, the people here revere their Industrial Lords. Personal achievement and enrichment are considered culturally important, and the pressure to "succeed" is sometimes worth the price of a Soul. Likewise, the folks at the bottom are always jealous of the folks on top and have to be reminded of their place. Word on the street is that Pale Meg is currently Incarnated there, so get it while you still can.

### **The Sands and Mount**

Soul-Merchants operating in this flat, desert world will find that the inhabitants believe they know the sum total of all knowledge because they have exhausted the mystery of their own world. This makes them arrogant and they do not imagine that Soul-Merchants could exist. It helps that Soul-Merchant's manifestations appear quite similar to that of their local Gods, many of whom have red-stained attributes and virile bull horns. The people have innumerable holy things and are common enough that desecrating one or two every decade isn't going to pull the attention of their magical priesthood.

### **The Academy Arcane**

This is one of those worlds where one faction embraces the Infernal Diaspora with open arms while others will go to great lengths to bedevil those they perceive as devils. One of the wizard families of acclaim in the Academy have Contracts which stipulate a number of favors with the Fallen specifically (not Soul-Merchants) which have yet to be called in. Consequently, Soul-Merchants have been reluctant to return to the Academy, knowing that there is a chance the wizards might call upon ancient favors that they would be forced to honor. What good is a Commission if it is spent paying off someone else's debts? No one even remembers which

Fallen made these ludicrous concessions. Clearly, these are cunning magi.

### **The Fanatic Assembly**

Although it is almost played out, a certain type of Soul-Merchant can still eke out a good living in the Fanatic Assembly. One need not be a supreme tempter to return home with spoils. You just have to beat out every other Soul Merchant. This world has the distinction of having once been a client state of the Burning Pit. The local mortals, to a person, aspired, as a matter of religious faith, to attain a Truly Wicked state. Soul-Merchants flooded in by the hundreds and pretty much ground it to dust as they made war on one another while the mortals set about committing deeds of greater and greater depravity. It has become a cliché since then, but everyone knows “Infernal client states never work.” Its best to let them progress as they do.

### **The Four Monarchies**

A world dominated by alien horrors, a situation that has gone entirely unknown to the mortals who live there. The world is primitive technologically (Unwatered!), but has a good size population for one to ply their trades. The leadership of the various tribes and city-states there are good fodder for deals, since they hold a heavy burden and their positions are quite tenuous. Their holy things are most often places and you’ll have to compete with other factions if you want to spoil them.

### **The Forsaken Plains of Glass**

At last count there were nine God-Emperors vying for whose Sun would be supreme among all others. If you want to get caught up in this mess, you might come back with a reasonable commission, but its a rough place at the moment. The heat of the setting sun will annihilate your Incarnation without shelter but you can learn a thing or two from their torturers. The world’s metaphysics are far too cynical to support any kind of spiritual orthodoxy; there are no relics to corrupt.

### **Gianthome**

Most of the inhabitants of Gianthome are humanoid mountains, kaiju, and giant animals. Its almost played out, but this old, old world still has some souls left in it. It has a scope that is often difficult to deal with; everything there is of a colossal size. The mortals there are desperate and oddly comfortable making deals with beings who are clearly bad news. Survival is always their priority, perhaps because their nomadic vardas are always one kaiju footstep away from obliteration. The witches here sometimes have sacred ritual implements, ripe for ravishing.

### **The Imperial Republic of Crystal and Lightning**

This place was never a resource world, but it is a legendary place of untold riches. Although they have not been seen in what is it now? Ten millennia? There once existed an empire, spanning worlds, whose aggression once threatened the Burning Pit itself. The Fallen, in their wisdom, sacrificed one of their own to prevent their electric legions from marching upon the Pit, their spears crackling with lightning. They are probably still out there, lurking, waiting for a moment to strike. Their empire, though, contained trillions of mortals and at least a dozen client-state Worlds. Perhaps a Soul-Merchant could find this place and perhaps, being mortal, they have forgot all about the Pit. If this were so, a Soul-Merchant could make a killing, so to speak. Still, nothing would anger the Fallen more than someone blithely seeking out such hated enemies. Soul Merchants, themselves the subject of boogy-man tales, treat the Imperial Republic of Crystal and Lightning as if they were the thing that goes bump in the night.

### **Garden of the Nemeses**



A world dominated by nobility who keep rampaging forces of chaos, personified by a putrid Lion God, at bay. Last reports claim they crawled out of a civil war which took a terrible toll upon them. Some of the Lion God's cultists possess True Wickedness and a shockingly high percentage of noble females are Pure of Spirit. This is not a world which deals in moral greys, a fact that more than makes up for the unrelenting suspicion any Soul Merchant will face in local dealings. Holy men are thick on the ground and always alert for the "forces of evil". Watch for their artifacts as some can obliterate a Soul Merchant's manifestation. They might seem good targets to befoul, but they can be one's undoing.

### **The Bitter Peaks of the Jarl-King**

A world of frost, choppy seas, and mountainous crags. The more civilized tribes are difficult to deal with since their shamans are wary of supernatural beings bearing gifts. Legend suggests it was once a problem for them. Their culture is so fatalistic that they do not quickly grasp at comfort or peace, if offered. However, the outlanders, exiles, and remote incestuous villages are quick to grasp at anything that will give them an edge. There is tradition of witchcraft amongst these people that is easy to exploit. Cults form around certain weapons, which are universally sacred enough to drain to its divinity.

### **A Ruin of Dying Embers**

This world was once a fairly humdrum place to visit for a millennia or so, but it has since been ground into a sliver of what it was by the greed of their ruling wizards. Indeed, sorcery was on the wane for some time and technological wonders were quickly making them obsolete. However, war broke out between the wizards and they accidentally started a fire beneath the surface of their world that is cooking it from the inside out. Many Soul Merchants were forced to return to the Burning Pit empty handed for which they suffered exquisitely. The world isn't dead yet, but its slowly roasting to the point of no longer having any souls at all to play with. Played. Out.

### **The Woods Primeval**

A heavily forested world with immense redwoods and towering oaks with trunks the size of houses. A primitive people who call themselves Pagans make their life here in a sort of nomadic hunter-gatherer existence. They call upon the spirits of ancestors and of the local trees for blessings, but their people are not afraid to accommodate deities of an entirely different, more Infernal, stripe. Careful, though, the water from their sacred artifact will instantly annihilate a Soul Merchant's incarnation. Something unknown (its not us!) is playing this world out with frightening speed, though, so get while the getting's good.

### **A World With No Shadow**

A thin world, struggling to be something more. Perhaps in another thousand years it will be ready for a large scale contingent of the Diaspora. As it is, the world is a place of chaos, with a few mortals eking out a terrible existence. Oddly, their world has embedded within its underlying metaphysics all the knowledge of the cosmos. Nothing anyone is aware of is capable of harnessing this potential. How ironic; a world of ignorant savages shitting and dying in a place which contains all knowable wisdom. Golems sometimes carry sacred artifacts, but they are already cursed and useless for infernal purposes.

### **Infernal Cosmology**

Because Soul Merchants traverse worlds and study the life cycle of such things, they have developed a lexicon and taxonomy for describing the various phenomena of the Worlds.

### **Tar Pit**

The Burning Pit has standing pools of many horrid substances, usually superheated to the edge of liquidity. One such hazard are pits of tar which are heated from below by geothermal radiation. This is the metaphor Soul Merchants use when describing a world from which there is no escape. Like the molten tar of the Burning Pit, once it grabs you, it does not let go. There are many worlds which have this property and each one is unique in how this phenomena manifests. Many worlds have “immune systems” which attempt to trap and ultimately destroy beings like Soul Merchants. Others simply chain down a Soul Merchant’s essence within their manifestation, preventing them from returning to their Fallen when they are annihilated physically. Some are so static that they do not permit physical movement. Among known Tar Pits are the Sacred Hall of Antiquities (a collection of holy symbols and artifacts), The Endless Sea of Ahp(a marine world which operates on strong and aggressive karmic principles), The World of Right Angles (a sub-three dimensional world which wreaks utter havoc on Soul Merchants’ physical manifestations), and the Blighted Fen (a swamp world whose bog literally acts as a tar pit to Soul Merchants).

### **Played Out World**

A world that is “played out” is circling the drain, falling into nothingness. Generally, you won’t find much of anything useful and you sure as hell don’t want to spend a full commission there since its likely to give up the ghost at any moment. Once a world is Played Out, its not much use to anyone, let alone the Soul Merchants. Soul Merchants who are absolutely desperate for action to take home to their Fallen sometimes try to pick over the remains of a world, since there are sometimes desperate mortals of value willing to cut deals. However, Played Out worlds almost always have low populations (indeed, sometimes loss of sentient life will play out a world) so the chances of finding quality souls is limited. Among various played out worlds are the Fanatic Assembly (a world who had once worshipped Soul Merchants and were subsequently ground into the dust; Infernal client states never work out long term), the Wan Dirigible (a vehicular world whose inhabitants are slowly boring themselves to death), the Eternal Abattoir (a world of senseless carnage whose inhabitants are mortal and not reproducing fast enough), and the Corpse of the Savior-Hero Wah-Jhorgun-Wah (a slain god whose mortal children have picked its flesh to the bone for sustenance).

### **Thin World**

Most worlds begin “thin”, which essentially means “without much substance or mortals”. Young worlds usually don’t have mortals immediately, although this is not always the case. There just isn’t much in a thin world. There might a single bodhisattva or there might be a hundred million bodhisattvas. Both worlds are pretty thin (not much going on). Worlds with nothing but immortals are thin too, but not quite in the same way. Thin in the sense that you aren’t going to find anything useful to you there. Its like mortals living off of water. They starve. Thin pickings.

### **Crowded World**

Soul-Merchants don’t generally prefer worlds with a lot of deities or powerful spirit beings roaming around. This is in part because such beings are often in a position to grant similar blessings to potential customers. Such worlds are considered crowded, because Soul-Merchants, at their core, believe themselves to be somewhat like gods unto themselves. They do not seek to compete for the hearts of their devotees. However, one takes what Commission they can get, and even a skilled Soul-Merchant can suss out a good living from amongst a number of competitors.

### **Gravedust**

Gravedust is paydirt. Its what Soul-Merchants call mortals. Mortals are Souls, wrapped up in flesh. Statistically, some of those Souls are going to be Nectar-Grade material. Sometimes the

Gravedust has good stuff inside, but overwhelmingly, it does not. Its up to Soul-Merchants to sift through the Gravedust to glean the kernels of value. Whether or not a being is Gravedust (that is to say, 'has a Soul') is not immediately apparent. Sure, humans do. That one is easy. There are, however, a bewildering array of beings, many of whom are sentient, who do not possess Souls. Even if they do possess a Soul, immortal beings are of no use to a Soul-Merchant. Fairies, bodhisattvas, ancestor spirits, sentient vermin, local gods, and the like are of no value in the soul trade.

### **Jack**

When a mortal bound to a Soul-Merchant via Contract dies, they become a Jack. To put it simply, a Jack is a Soul in a state of imprisonment within the Maw of a Soul-Merchant. In this state, they are a sort of "everyman". They might as well not have a past. They certainly don't have a future. The term itself is a useful way to talk about your victories: the first Soul-Merchant to "play a Jack" wins accolades. No one seems to remember the second Jack. If you hold the most Jacks at the end of a Commission, the Fallen will be pleased. While in the Soul-Merchant's Maw a Jack feels little other than claustrophobia and the understanding that their senses are nearly useless. They have almost no sense of memory or self. Any impressions they experience are vague. One might speculate that such a state might be described as "womb-like" but there is no way to know. They might already be suffering. There is no way to tell. A Soul-Merchant can swap Jacks with other Soul-Merchants, but they cannot disgorge them until they are in their True Form. Unless something incredibly weird is happening, Soul-Merchants can only exist in their True Forms in the Burning Pit itself.

### **Terms for Infrastructure and Technology**

The worlds that play host to Soul-Merchants have a wide range of technological advancements. Sometimes Soul-Merchants will talk about 'Smokers', worlds which have achieved an industrial age (usually using fossil fuels, such as coal). 'Unwatered' worlds are those who mostly lack in plumbing (bathrooms, specifically) to cater to the realities of their Incarnation. These things are important when made flesh. Some worlds are said to be strictly 'Sword and Sandal' meaning 'primitive'. Such people simply bind their feet in lieu of shoes and resort to warfare without being overly concerned about the death toll.

## **An Out of Play Discussion of the Burning Pit**

### **Villain, Not Punk**

Fractured LARP has forums. Before bringing a Soul-Merchant into play, post Out-of-Play a short biography and brief description of your True Form for other Soul-Merchant players. This is useful because Soul-Merchants are supposed to know each other generally. There just aren't that many and they have a lot of time on their hands. Use the "notable Soul-Merchants" section in this setting packet as a guideline for the kind of information Soul-Merchants know about one another.

Obviously Soul-Merchants shouldn't be jerks. They, like most people, aren't out to get everyone. If you play a Soul-Merchant, you are not a villain. You aren't even really a demon. You are a product of a very bad environment. Soul-Merchants generally prefer peace to war and help their fellow traveller when they can. They just happen to be the property of very bad people. They are sent on morally indefensible missions in alien places. Honestly, Soul-Merchants could use some peace and quiet. Their time in the Fractured could be, in some ways, a welcome break away from that horrible, horrible place: home. Why would anyone spoil that atmosphere with petty johnny-come-lately evils?

Many players confuse evil with power. They intuitively feel that doing spiteful things makes them somehow more fit because they have a noticeable or even spectacular effect. This is what I like to call the “Three-Player Risk Game” Factor. Some players derive satisfaction being the third player to swoop in and defeat the other two players after they decimate each other. Because the third player is the last one standing, their intuition tells them that they are the most “fit” and the most “powerful”. Soul-Merchants are not fooled by this human intuition. Spoiling the victory for the other two players was passive, and therefore, not an act, evil or otherwise. They understand that guttersnipe attacks against a greater force is inherently (and more importantly, stupidly) self-destructive. Any Soul-Merchant worth their salt is in the game to win. That means not shitting up the place immediately. Sure, in 900 years the shit might be gone, but what idiot wants to live with a thousand or more years being known as “that guy”? Likewise, Soul-Merchants are benevolent towards those beneath them. They think long term and a Soul-Merchant’s Commission can be broken in an instant by mistaking the wrong person as being helpless. Ultimately, it is easier for a Soul-Merchant to be humble and occasionally benevolent than risk being seen as a menace.

### **Pecking Order**

Soul-Merchant rank and social status is based on the number of one’s Estates, the quality of one’s Nectars, and the highest rung in which one is permitted to own an Estate. Consequently, players can decide their character’s rank as a matter of preference. I won’t go into the reasons why someone might want to place themselves at the bottom of the totem pole. However, players should realize that traditionally Soul-Merchants in Incarnation try to “take down” the highest-ranked amongst their number. The lesser unite against the greater and divide the spoils. In a way, playing someone with an Estate in Triggillos or Eed is a bit like challenging your fellow Soul-Merchants to “beat me”. The tone of the game is certainly competitive, and in this way it is a player-versus-player conflict. However, the coin of the realm here is not murder (unsportsmanlike in and out of game). Soul-Merchants will almost certainly be allied with one another for the most part during the Golden Decades.

### **Soul-Merchant Names and Fashion**

Soul-Merchants are extremely cosmopolitan. They get around. They’ve seen places mortals could only dream of. They are jaded, old souls who have traversed the endless sea of worlds. They have tasted the culinary traditions and spent an evening at a number of peoples’ operas. They collect the fashions of many places and synthesize it with their world’s own native aesthetic. Consequently, Soul-Merchants can dress more or less like anything. Obviously, your costume should clearly be a costume. It could evoke real-world style as long as it old enough to belong to the realm of the fantastic. Players come to LARPs to be transported to a different world and Soul-Merchants have no excuse to not look cool. Because of the freedom of choice inherent, Soul-Merchants should look the part.

The names of Soul-Merchants are usually abstractions, titles, or some sort of alien syllable. Most Soul-Merchant names are approximations anyways. Presumably, it would be pronounced in a manner human vocal organs cannot produce. Consequently, they are translated or else are simply strange sounding. The names of the “Notable Soul-Merchants” give an excellent guideline.

### **Five Things Every Soul-Merchant Knows**

Every Soul-Merchant knows...

*...which of the Fallen they serve as a Vassal.*

Every Soul-Merchant works at the behest of one of the demon-kings known as the Fallen:

terrible Ororgorolestes, vengeful Cacotrope, corrupting Vil, or horrifying Zeevuv. By making a contract with the Fallen, you are Incarnated as a mortal being for a thousand years. In this time, you are expected to obtain the Souls of Truly Wicked and the Pure of Spirit.

*...that lies and violence are the weakest of sins.*

To walk in the path of the Great Primal Evil, one must avoid lesser evils. It is perfectly acceptable, perhaps even appropriate, to goad or bribe people into committing these sins themselves. However, the Soul-Merchant who does these things themselves will quickly find themselves becoming more primitive in their demonic nature. Lesser sins are, therefore, a form of death.

*...that the real "game" is not using power. It is gathering power.*

Souls eligible for contracting with Soul-Merchants are rare. Getting them to sign a contract is also hard. This is why Soul-Merchants must have the tightest operation. They do not move without having set up things in their favor for years. Soul-Merchants live a long time. They only collect their dues upon the death of those who contract with them.

*...that the Golden Decades are a sacred time.*

The Infernal Diaspora comes upon useful worlds rarely, and when they do open, Soul-Merchants like to enjoy the unspoiled atmosphere amongst the locals and themselves. Consequently, even though they are soul-stealing monsters, Soul-Merchants try hard not ruin things for the first few decades. No one wants to spend 999 years being called "that guy". Its also safer to play it cool.

*...that Soul-Merchants are a dwindling and despised people.*

Many people have negative preconceptions of Soul-Merchants and what they are. Consequently, a certain number of Soul-Merchants are lost or imprisoned every once in a while. Powerful Sorceries and Holy Artifacts can wreak havoc on an Incarnation. Even home is hostile and some Soul-Merchants are fed up with the torture business. The game just isn't what it used to be.

## **Influences**

### *Paradise Lost*

The poet William Blake once said that John Milton, the author of Paradise Lost, was "of the devil's party". This is because his epic account of the Judeo-Christian Angelic War in Heaven and subsequent Fall of Man seems to articulate Satan's position with greater fortitude. "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." Indeed, Mister Milton.

### *Dante's Inferno*

It should come as no shock that I plagiarized (and deepened) many elements of this configuration of Hell.

### *The Screwtape Letters*

An older demon teaches a younger demon mankind's various moral weaknesses in a series of correspondences. Although its meant as allegory, it just might be good advice for up-and-coming Soul-Merchants.

### *Barlow's Inferno*

A book of art and literature by Wayne Barlow in which he details his own configuration of Hell. Like many of Clive Barker's infernal realms, it blends science fiction materialism with supernatural horror.

*The Hellbound Heart*

A Soul escapes a hell-like realm and is pursued by BDSM demon-priests. Although this Clive Barker work was the inspiration for the first Hellraiser, it did not have the satanic overtones that later iterations had.

*"Sympathy for the Devil" by the Rolling Stones*

Yeah, that.