

The Soul Merchants

A Blades in the Dark One-Shot

Most citizens of Duskwall are terrified of ghosts. Lost, mad, destructive spirits, whose only desire is to return to the warm embrace of a warm body. They've lost their own, but are eager to adopt yours.

But there are also the addicts. Those who long to lose control. To drown, not in a bottle, or on the tip of a syringe, but under the complete and utter control of ghostly possession.

The addicts come to you. You're their source; you're their dealer. You're the ones who set it up; you're the ones who guarantee their safety while they're under. Well, relative safety, anyway. And maybe more "encourage" than "guarantee."

It's a small market, but a profitable one - and it's all yours. And if anybody tries to muscle in and take it from you, well, you're just going to need to go show them how this business works.

Scenario by Ziv Wities. Beta, March 6th 2017.

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Introduction

“The Soul Merchants” is a *Blades in the Dark* one-shot, and works as a standalone introduction to *Blades in the Dark*.

It is planned for 3-5 players, and about 4 hours.

This game is a little different from some existing *Blades* one-shots; it gives you an entire existing crew, and a very specific starting point. I see this as a way to spotlight some of the unique things *Blades in the Dark* can do - elements of the game which would be hard to reach in a single session, but starting *in medias res* lets us cut directly to them.

Points “The Soul Merchants” tries to hit include:

- A cast of characters with strange relations to death, and to those who lie beyond it
- A crew sunk up to its neck in the spirit trade
- A de-emphasis of physical violence, in favor of approaches more social, sneaky, or all-out weird

Enjoy :)

Running a One-Shot

There are different ways to adjust *Blades in the Dark* into one-shot format. For this scenario we recommend the following adjustments to simplify the usual rules:

- **Pregenerated characters**, included in this document.
- **No crew sheet**. Think of the crew as **Tier 0 Hawkers**. The crew has the **Ghost Market** ability, and a **cohort** of Thugs.
- Introduce the game by **filling out remaining details**, in the Crew Creation section.
- **Simplified Downtime**.
 - No training.
 - No long-term projects. (Consider Acquiring Assets instead.)
 - Simplified Acquire an Asset:
 - 1-3: failure.
 - 4-5: success, but of inferior quality, or with a complication arising from the purchase.
 - 6: success.
 - Simplified Recover:
 - 1-3: Remove one level of harm.
 - 4-5: Remove two levels of harm.
 - 6: Remove three levels of harm.
 - For example, if a character has suffered two types of Level 1 Harm, rolling a 5 would let them get rid of both instances of harm (= two levels). With Level 3 harm, rolling a 5 would let them reduce their level 3 harm to level 1 harm.
- **No XP**. No, not even for desperate rolls. Yes, we’re sad about that too.

We suggest a 4-hour game. Aim for two scores with a downtime in between - but you might find yourself focusing on a single large score; that’s fine too.

Credits

This game was written by [Ziv Wities](#), for the Israeli roleplaying convention [BIGOR](#), April 2017.

Crew Creation

The crew is a group of Hawkers; the vice that they provide is none other than possession by ghosts. It's a rare vice, but that just means it's a lucrative market - if you handle things right.

Each player should pick a pregenerated character. No character is indispensable; no combination is wrong.

Each character has two acquaintances. Each player should answer: **Which of these is a close friend, and which is a bitter rival?**

The group should answer the following questions, to establish and flesh out their crew:

You provides a service to both humans and ghosts. How do the ghosts pay?

- **Secrets?** Give the crew a 4-segment clock of **Secrets** to draw on when they need information... or somebody to blackmail into being helpful.
- **Spirit Essence?** Give the crew a 4-clock of **Spirit Essence** to draw on. Spirit essences can create (temporary) weird effects when applied to inanimate objects or machinery, or convey a single vivid memory.

Who are your clientele?

- **Low class?** Respectably-sized vice den; stable stream of clients; influence in the streets.
- **High class?** Respectably-appointed cubbyhole; only a handful of carefully-selected clients; influence among the elite.

What's your set-up?

How do you operate; what does your den look like; what important measures have you got in place? (A few details are plenty here.)

What is your cohort like?

Pick an edge: Fearsome, Independent, Loyal, or Tenacious.

Pick a flaw: Principled, Savage, Unreliable, or Wild.

Starting Situation: Your Ghosts Have Gone Missing

Your ghosts have gone missing.

Through ritual and deal-making both, you've got a bargain with them -- they show up, they do as they're told, they get warm bodies for a few hours.

Something is wrong. Not a single one has shown up.

Could this be **the Red Sashes**, seeing you as competition for their drug dens? Or is it **The Dimmer Sisters** who have marked you as rivals, elbowing in on the spirit trade? Or is something stranger going on -- could this be the initiative of the ghosts themselves? Why, and how, would they band against you?

Where the hell are they?

What the hell are you going to tell your clients?

And who the hell is trying to mess with you?

We'll play to find out...

Clocks

At the beginning of the game, place the following clocks:

Angry Clients, 6 segments. Your clients want their fix; when this clock completes, they take drastic action.

Second Strike, 6 segments. Whoever's got it out for you isn't finished yet - especially if you can't leave well enough alone. This clock is for their next blow.

Attention from Spirit Wardens, 6 segments, 2 pre-ticked. You've already done things that might have gotten you noticed... do too many more, and you'll be getting a visit.

Suspects

Who might be behind this? Who do you suspect, and how will you investigate?

- **The Red Sashes**, elegant swordfighters turned to crime, who see you as competition for their drug dens.
- **The Dimmer Sisters**, eldritch women who hold Duskwall's spirit trade under their thumb - and you're intruding.
- **The ghosts themselves**. Could they have rebelled? Has something happened? Is something fishy going on beyond the veil?

Kristov

A crafty deal-maker and vice purveyor.

You tell it to them straight: Ghosts are people, just like you and me. You ain't gotta like 'em, you ain't gotta trust 'em, but that doesn't mean you don't treat 'em with respect. Just like everybody else, really.

If anybody knows, it's you. When you were caught in a mine collapse, it was ghosts that kept you alive. A person learns a lot, alone in the dark, day after day, with only dead friends for company. And what you learned, you teach to others -- your bluff, homesy advice rings true and strikes hard. People feel good listening to you. You may not always be honest, but you're always heartfelt.

A lot of what you're teaching people these days is how much they want your product. How letting a ghost take them over would be just what the doctor ordered -- and, letting the ghosts know what easy, willing subjects you have to offer them, and making sure they take care of the bargain. It's not an easy sell, but you're damn good at it.

Vice: You have several lovers. All of them are devoted. All of them are ghosts.

INSIGHT				Ghost Voice: You know the secret method to interact with a ghost or demon as if it was a normal human, regardless of how wild or feral it appears. You gain potency when communicating with the supernatural.		
Hunt	☐	☐	Learn a target; sharpshooting			
Study	☒	☐	Research, deeper understanding			
Survey	☐	☐	Situational awareness			
Tinker	☐	☐	Work with machines or chemicals			
PROWESS				GEAR choose load: ♦3 - <i>light</i> , ♦5 - <i>normal</i> , ♦6 - <i>heavy</i>		
Finesse	☐	☐	Pickpocketing; deft movement	☐ <i>Fine clothes & jewelry</i> ☐ Fine bottle of whiskey ☐ <i>Fine loaded dice, trick cards</i> ☐ <i>Trance powder</i> ☐ A cane-sword ☐ <i>Spiritbane charm</i>	☐ A Blade or Two ☐ Throwing Knives ☐ A Pistol ☐ A 2nd Pistol ☐ A Large Weapon ☐ An Unusual Weapon ☐ Armor ☐ +Heavy ☐ Burglary Gear ☐ Climbing Gear ☐ Arcane Implements ☐ Documents ☐ Subterfuge Supplies ☐ Demolition Tools ☐ Tinkering Tools ☐ Lantern	
Prowl	☐	☐	Stealthy movement; sneak attacks			
Skirmish	☒	☐	Close combat			
Wreck	☐	☐	Wreak chaos and destruction			
RESOLVE						
Attune	☐	☐	Supernatural sensitivity	Sly Friends ▽△ Nyryx, a possessor ghost ▽△ Cyrene, a vigilante		
Command	☒	☐	Intimidate, or give orders to a subordinate			
Consort	☒	☒	Do well in social situations			
Sway	☒	☒	Persuasion, charm, deception			

Bleach

An arcane researcher and scientist.

What extraordinary joy! What extraordinary privilege! To practice science, as it *should* be practiced, at the very forefront of research!

What you study is the ghost field that surrounds and suffuses us all; that veritably hums with the energy of the dead. Although most people can hardly perceive the ghost field at all, you have a very hands-on approach. You have an innate sense for it, and with your chemicals, measurements, and tinkering, you can produce very exciting experiments indeed!

The crew sometimes treats you as their technician – it is you who does the work of luring ghosts, guiding them to your waiting clientele. You accept that energetically, enthusiastically, as you do everything. But what you are really doing is research – studying the nature of possession. If your theories are correct, possessing human bodies can keep a spirit stable and sane. Now, *you* have every intention of being a ghost yourself when you shuffle off this mortal coil. So, finding a way to keep ghosts sane seems to you like a task of the very highest priority. Really, solving this one simple problem would be a near-guarantee of a happy afterlife for all; how is it that *everyone* isn't joining in on this?

Vice: Self-experimentation. You have to test your theories out *somewhere*, don't you?

INSIGHT				Ghost Ward: You know how to Wreck an area with arcane substances and methods so it is either anathema or enticing to spirits (your choice).	
Hunt	☐	☐	Learn a target; sharpshooting		
Study	☒	☒	Research, deeper understanding		
Survey	☐	☐	Situational awareness		
Tinker	☒	☐	Work with machines or chemicals		
PROWESS				GEAR choose load: ♦3 - light, ♦5 - normal, ♦6 - heavy	
Finesse	☐	☐	Pickpocketing; deft movement	☐ Fine tinkering tools ☐ Fine wrecking tools ☐ <i>Blowgun & darts, syringes</i> ☐ Bandolier (3 uses) ☐ Bandolier (3 uses)	☐ A Blade or Two ☐ Throwing Knives ☐ A Pistol ☐ A 2nd Pistol ☐ A Large Weapon ☐ An Unusual Weapon ☐ Armor ☐ +Heavy ☐ Burglary Gear ☐ Climbing Gear ☐ Arcane Implements ☐ Documents ☐ Subterfuge Supplies ☐ Demolition Tools ☐ Tinkering Tools ☐ Lantern
Prowl	☐	☐	Stealthy movement; sneak attacks		
Skirmish	☐	☐	Close combat		
Wreck	☒	☒	Wreak chaos and destruction		
RESOLVE					
Attune	☒	☒	Supernatural sensitivity	Clever Friends ▽△ Stazia, an apothecary ▽△ Veldren, a psychonaut	
Command	☐	☐	Intimidate, or give orders to a subordinate		
Consort	☐	☐	Do well in social situations		
Sway	☐	☐	Persuasion, charm, deception		
Alchemicals					
Bandolier I ☐ ☐ ☐		Alcahest		Fire Oil	
Bandolier II ☐ ☐ ☐		Binding Oil		Grenade	
		Drift Oil		Quicksilver	
		Drown Powder		Skullfire Poison	
		Eyeblind Poison			
When you use a bandolier slot, choose an alchemical:					

Chill

A calculating, well-connected mastermind.

The line between life and death is razor-thin. Walking that line gives you power over both.

Your skin is pale; your touch is cold. You stitch some people together; you rip others apart. With your crew, you unite between the living and the dead – combining them, until the two are indistinguishable. Your forbidden sect has taught you to always seek the border between the living and the dead – to find it, and pull others towards it. From whichever side they may be on.

You have grown very good at this. You have found many in the city who seek the embrace of deathly possession, however they have concealed their secret. You have grown networks of allies and whisperers. You can reach almost anybody; prepare for almost anything. Standing atop the border, you are a creature of perfect clarity, of perfect balance.

You will bring others to this place.

And you will never fall.

Vice: Faith. Member of a forbidden cult, worshipping the border between life and death.

INSIGHT				Foresight: Two times per score you can assist a teammate without paying stress. Tell us how you prepared for this. Physicker: You can Tinker with bones, blood, and bodily humours to treat wounds or stabilize the dying. You may study a malady or corpse. Everyone in your crew gets +1d to their healing treatment rolls.	
Hunt	●	○	Learn a target; sharpshooting		
Study	○	○	Research, deeper understanding		
Survey	○	○	Situational awareness		
Tinker	●	●	Work with machines or chemicals		
PROWESS				GEAR choose load: ♦3 - <i>light</i> , ♦5 - <i>normal</i> , ♦6 - <i>heavy</i>	
Finesse	●	●	Pickpocketing; deft movement	○ Fine tinkering tools ○ <i>Blowgun & darts, syringes</i> ○ <i>Fine cover identity</i> ○ Fine bottle of whiskey ○ Blueprints ○ <i>Vial of slumber essence</i> ○ <i>Concealed palm pistol</i>	○ A Blade or Two ○ Throwing Knives ○ A Pistol ○ A 2nd Pistol ○ ○ A Large Weapon ○ An Unusual Weapon ○ ○ Armor ○ ○ +Heavy ○ Burglary Gear ○ Climbing Gear ○ Arcane Implements ○ Documents ○ Subterfuge Supplies ○ ○ Demolition Tools ○ Tinkering Tools ○ Lantern
Prowl	○	○	Stealthy movement; sneak attacks		
Skirmish	○	○	Close combat		
Wreck	○	○	Wreak chaos and destruction		
RESOLVE					
Attune	○	○	Supernatural sensitivity	Shrewd Friends ▽△ Jeren, a bluecoat archivist ▽△ Eckerd, a corpse thief	
Command	○	○	Intimidate, or give orders to a subordinate		
Consort	●	○	Do well in social situations		
Sway	●	○	Persuasion, charm, deception		

Milos

A proud adept of the arcane and master of ghosts.

You are sick and tired of people endlessly droning on about how dangerous and frightening your line of work is.

Ghosts are merchandise. You are the proprietor. It's as simple as that.

Dangerous merchandise, to be sure. Which is why you take precautions. You are meticulous with your summonings and rituals; you have all the necessary tokens and talismans and apparatus; you are conscientious in regard to your own safety. (If your crew members are more careless about *their* safety then, well, perhaps they shall learn soon enough.)

You even have another Whisper backing you up – although it *is* that buffoon Bleach. Not an unintelligent individual, to be fair; just an utter fool besides.

The point is, the ghosts are under control. *Your* control. That is what you are here for. And woe to the ghost – or man – who says otherwise.

Vice: You collect spirits of notable individuals – or, in a pinch, minor individuals in notable organizations. There's an *amazing* collectors' network in Duskwall, although you're still firmly in the shallow end of the pool.

INSIGHT				Compel: You can Attune to the ghost field to force a nearby ghost to appear and obey a command you give it. You are not supernaturally terrified by a ghost you summon or compel (though your allies may be).		
Hunt	●	●	Learn a target; sharpshooting			
Study	○	○	Research, deeper understanding			
Survey	●	○	Situational awareness			
Tinker	○	○	Work with machines or chemicals			
PROWESS				GEAR choose load: ♦3 - <i>light</i> , ♦5 - <i>normal</i> , ♦6 - <i>heavy</i>		
Finesse	○	○	Pickpocketing; deft movement	☐ Fine lightning hook ☐ Fine spirit mask ☐ <i>Electroplasm vials</i> ☐ Spirit bottles (2) ☐ <i>Ghost key</i> ☐ <i>Demonbane charm</i>	☐ A Blade or Two ☐ Throwing Knives ☐ A Pistol ☐ A 2nd Pistol ☐ A Large Weapon ☐ An Unusual Weapon ☐ Armor ☐ ☐ ☐ +Heavy ☐ Burglary Gear ☐ Climbing Gear ☐ Arcane Implements ☐ Documents ☐ Subterfuge Supplies ☐ Demolition Tools ☐ Tinkering Tools ☐ Lantern	
Prowl	●	○	Stealthy movement; sneak attacks			
Skirmish	○	○	Close combat			
Wreck	○	○	Wreak chaos and destruction			
RESOLVE						
Attune	●	●	Supernatural sensitivity	Strange Friends ▽△ Setarra, a demon ▽△ Quellyn, a witch		
Command	●	○	Intimidate, or give orders to a subordinate			
Consort	○	○	Do well in social situations			
Sway	○	○	Persuasion, charm, deception			

Holtzmann

An intimidating fighter and security expert.

Enough good men and women have died by your side, one might think you'd overcome any fear one might have of ghosts.

On the other hand, it was ghosts that killed them.

When you left the military, you thought you'd be set back here in Duskwall. You weren't. You just sank deeper and deeper into the muck. Finally, you had the choice between going criminal, and... well, actually, it turned out there wasn't any other choice.

Now, you're the crew's security, and head bruiser. You're the one who commands the gang of thugs that protect you, and that knock threateningly on people's doors or on people's heads.

It's almost like being back in the army. It's just a different kind of hell.

Vice: Holtzmann collects spirits of men and women who died in the military, and often soaks himself in their memories.

INSIGHT				Leader: When you Command a cohort in combat, they gain +1 effect and 1 armor. They continue to fight when they would otherwise break (they're not taken out when they suffer level 3 harm). Bodyguard: When you protect a teammate, take +1d to your resistance roll. When you gather info to anticipate possible threats in the current situation, you get +1 effect.		
Hunt	●	○	Learn a target; sharpshooting			
Study	○	○	Research, deeper understanding			
Survey	●	○	Situational awareness			
Tinker	○	○	Work with machines or chemicals			
PROWESS				GEAR choose load: ♦3 - <i>light</i> , ♦5 - <i>normal</i> , ♦6 - <i>heavy</i>		
Finesse	○	○	Pickpocketing; deft movement	☐ Fine hand weapon ☐ Fine heavy weapon ☐ Scary weapon or tool ☐ <i>Manacles & chain</i> ☐ <i>Rage essence vial</i> ☐ <i>Spiritbane charm</i>	☐ A Blade or Two ☐ Throwing Knives ☐ A Pistol ☐ A 2nd Pistol ☐ A Large Weapon ☐ An Unusual Weapon ☐ Armor ☐ +Heavy ☐ Burglary Gear ☐ Climbing Gear ☐ Arcane Implements ☐ Documents ☐ Subterfuge Supplies ☐ Demolition Tools ☐ Tinkering Tools ☐ Lantern	
Prowl	○	○	Stealthy movement; sneak attacks			
Skirmish	●	●	Close combat			
Wreck	●	○	Wreak chaos and destruction			
RESOLVE				Dangerous Friends ▽△ Grace, an extortionist ▽△ Chael, a vicious thug		
Attune	○	○	Supernatural sensitivity			
Command	●	●	Intimidate, or give orders to a subordinate			
Consort	○	○	Do well in social situations			
Sway	○	○	Persuasion, charm, deception			

Jemminy

A stealthy infiltrator and social chameleon.

You know the best way to leave all your troubles behind? Be somebody else.

People laugh when you say that, but the truth is, you're the one laughing. They're all stuck in their dreary, mundane little selves. You're the one who's always fresh, always new, the one who gets to be anything you want to be. There is nothing as amazing in the world as becoming *somebody else* -- it's like jumping from one reality into another, as often as you like.

Well, maybe not as often as you'd *like*.

The criminal world brings you pretty damn close, though. Being other people gives you power -- to get places you shouldn't be able to go; see things you aren't meant to see; set your hands on things you absolutely aren't supposed to be touching. You're good at it. You case the joint, learn the part, sink into the role -- and come out with a tidy profit. It's a sweet set-up.

Of course, sometimes that isn't enough. Pretending is fantastic, but it's still not the real thing. Imagining the world through somebody else's eyes warps your world, but it still isn't the same as seeing the world through somebody else's eyes, *literally*.

For that, you've got a different approach. The clients like it, too.

Vice: Possession by ghosts.

INSIGHT				Cloak & Dagger: When you use a disguise or other form of covert misdirection, you get +1d to rolls to confuse or deflect suspicion. When you throw off your disguise, the resulting surprise gives you the initiative in the situation.		
Hunt	☐	☐	Learn a target; sharpshooting			
Study	☒	☐	Research, deeper understanding			
Survey	☒	☐	Situational awareness			
Tinker	☐	☐	Work with machines or chemicals			
PROWESS				GEAR choose load: ♦3 - <i>light</i> , ♦5 - <i>normal</i> , ♦6 - <i>heavy</i>		
Finesse	☒	☐	Pickpocketing; deft movement	☐ <i>Fine lockpicks</i> ☐ Fine disguise kit ☐ Fine shadow cloak ☐ Light climbing gear ☐ <i>Silence potion vial</i> ☐ Dark-sight goggles ☐ <i>Spiritbane charm</i>	☐ A Blade or Two ☐ Throwing Knives ☐ A Pistol ☐ A 2nd Pistol ☐ A Large Weapon ☐ An Unusual Weapon ☐ Armor ☐ ☐ ☐ +Heavy ☐ Burglary Gear ☐ Climbing Gear ☐ Arcane Implements ☐ Documents ☐ Subterfuge Supplies ☐ Demolition Tools ☐ Tinkering Tools ☐ Lantern	
Prowl	☒	☒	Stealthy movement; sneak attacks			
Skirmish	☐	☐	Close combat			
Wreck	☐	☐	Wreak chaos and destruction			
RESOLVE						
Attune	☐	☐	Supernatural sensitivity	Shady Friends ▽△ Telda, a beggar ▽△ Roslyn Kellis, a noble		
Command	☐	☐	Intimidate, or give orders to a subordinate			
Consort	☒	☐	Do well in social situations			
Sway	☒	☐	Persuasion, charm, deception			

GM Notes

Some pointers as to where the game might go.

Scores

What's your response? What do you do next?

The crew can respond to the scenario however they choose; guide them to picking a score, and choosing a plan, as usual.

Likely scores include:

- **Rescue Mission.** Assault or infiltrate your rivals' domain. Free your ghosts, and get some payback while you're at it.
Where are the ghosts being held? How are they being kept contained? What are your rivals planning to do with them?
- **Summoning Circle.** Use arcane power to summon your ghosts right back where they belong - doing your bidding.
How do you summon the ghosts? What dangers does the summoning carry? What else might be summoned along with them?
- **Customer Comes First.** Ignore the attack, until you've got your clientele taken care of. Round up some new ghosts, and cut a deal with them.
Where will you find 2-3 spirits fresh enough to do business? What have they heard of you? Do you trust them?

Complications

- **Careless Handling.** The kidnapping attempt has hit a hitch -- the ghosts have gotten loose, and are going berserk.
What place and what people are the ghosts putting at risk? How long before the Spirit Wardens arrive?
- **Warped Ghosts.** Something weird has *happened* to the ghosts during their absence.
In what way has the ghosts' appearance changed? What new ability have they gained? What new danger do they pose for the clients?

Other Developments

Further complications and possibilities in the lives of a crew coordinating bodily possession for a living.

- **Special Request.** A pair of clients - human and ghost - are not content to sit in the den for the length of the possession. They want to go out and about.
What foolhardy thing do they want to do? What are they offering in return?
- **Ghost Hunt.** A client is willing to pay a hefty sum to be possessed by a *very specific ghost* -- if you can track it down on time.
What ghost is being asked for? Why is it so important? Who else is looking for it too?
- **House Calls.** Two of your ghosts are bonding to your clients, possessing them at odd hours -- without your protection, and, without you getting your cut.
What do you do about this? How do your other ghosts respond and react?

