

SHADOWS OVER VATHAK

Secret Societies of Vathak: The People of Ash



A Secret Society of Hauntlings

Shadows
over
Vathak

A Campaign Setting Book of Lovecraftian Adventure Horror

LANDON WINKLER AND RICK HERSHEY



Secret Societies of Vathak

THE PEOPLE OF ASH

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INTRODUCTION

Every hauntling community across Vathak has a copy of *The Litany of Ashes*, either kept openly as a centerpiece of community life or hidden away to be consulted in secret. Although there are many versions of the tome, they all describe Fire's Fury liberating the soul from the body, freeing it to find a new life and new purpose as a hauntling.

Those hauntlings who believe their souls were freed by fire call themselves the People of Ash. They search for purpose among *The Litany of Ashes* and their own fire-stained memories. Members seek various flavors of personal gratification, revenge for wrongs against their past lives, or even ways to help those around them.

The Litany of Ashes says that the only way to make iron into steel is by hammering it in the fire, encouraging members who wish for a better Vathak to pose as villains and refine the next generation of heroes. Many of those "villains" come too close to the inferno, however, forgetting their true face in place of the mask and attracting the attention of Tel'egoth.

Alignment: N (lay members) / NE (leadership)

STRUCTURE

The People of Ash gather their membership from hauntlings and their organization mirrors hauntling social structures. In much of Vathak, individual hauntlings explore their memories or temper those around them in complete isolation. But areas where hauntlings concentrate, whether in their own villages or the ghettos of larger human cities, have gatherings of the People.

These gatherings are generally informal affairs, where a small group will meet at the most respected member's home, read from *The Litany of Ashes*, and discuss their memories and beliefs. In theory, these types of gatherings are democratic. However, a gathering's leaders find their own purposes and those purposes tend to steer the gathering as a whole.

Aside from the pull of charisma, nothing prevents conflicts between gatherings or even within the same gathering. The People believe that every soul has a purpose and that their highest goal is to pursue those purposes, which creates an inclination towards non-interference. Few members are willing to stand in the way of another member's purpose and fewer still will endanger another hauntling's life. Even when two members' purposes are opposed, it generally leads to long discussions and convoluted compromise, rather than fragmenting the gathering or violence.

Solitary members are less tied to the society's norms and will come into conflict with each other or gatherings. Although these

cases do sometimes lead to violence, the value hauntlings place on each other generally prevents serious consequences.

LOCATIONS

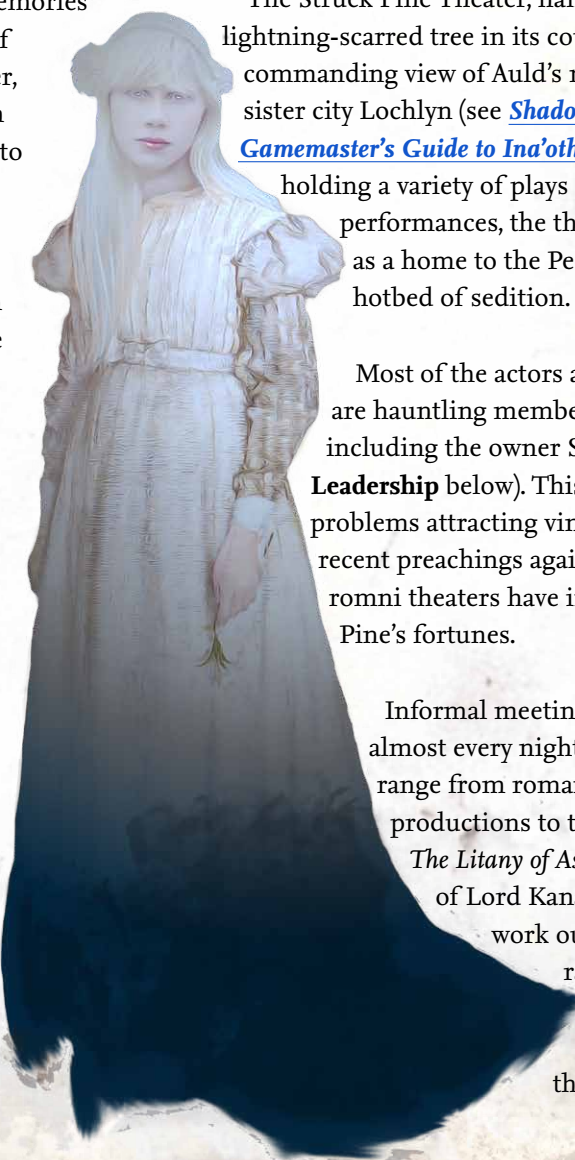
The three largest gatherings of the People can be found in Auld, capital of Ina'oth; Edhelion, its rival for that position; and Skalan, capital of the Colonies. Smaller gatherings are scattered throughout Ina'oth, Sileasia, and even Grigoria.

AULD

The Struck Pine Theater, named after the lightning-scarred tree in its courtyard, holds a commanding view of Auld's mist-shrouded sister city Lochlyn (see [Shadows over Vathak: Gamemaster's Guide to Ina'oth](#)). Along with holding a variety of plays and musical performances, the theater also serves as a home to the People of Ash and a hotbed of sedition.

Most of the actors and all of the staff are hauntling members of the society, including the owner Sarkana (see **Leadership** below). This originally caused problems attracting vindari customers, but recent preachings against the romni and romni theaters have improved the Struck Pine's fortunes.

Informal meetings occur backstage almost every night. Discussions range from romance and upcoming productions to the finer points of *The Litany of Ashes* and the crimes of Lord Kanaras. Members who work outside the theater rarely make these meetings, working as mediums among the noble courts or



even engaging in the frivolities of the idle rich, but are always welcomed as old friends when they find the time to attend.

Hidden beneath the stage is a refurbished printing press, used to create programs for the theater's productions and copies of *The Litany of Ashes*. Sarkana has considered using the same press to produce leaflets decrying and mocking Auld's government, but is still waiting for the appropriate time.

EDHELION

Although a few small gatherings of the People of Ash are spread throughout Edhelion, the most important center of activity is actually north of the city proper, inside the Kovan Barrens. Several dozen People work in their camp, felling trees and burning their wood down for charcoal to sell in the city.

The camp itself is shrouded with a constant haze of smoke, covering the buildings with a layer of ash like a dusting of snow and driving the scent of pine from the air. Residents and visitors alike wear simple leather masks, which legitimately help protect them from the smoke and heat, but also protect their identities from outsiders and even each other. No one is certain who the elaborately-masked Foreman (see **Leadership**) is or where he goes between fiery pronouncements, but it's suspected he lives as a normal member the rest of the time or that the Foreman is actually a spirit that takes over other members when the Fire's Fury needs to guide them.

The People of Edhelion are among the most fanatical members of the society. The Foreman teaches that the vindari must be exposed to the trials of fire, although whether the vindari will be extinguished or be reforged into a shield that can actually protect Vathak varies from sermon to sermon. The lay members join in his enthusiasm,

looking to him as a near-divine force, second only to *The Litany of Ashes* itself.

It's said that the Foreman has recovered a complete, perhaps even original, copy of *The Litany of Ashes*. Those who claim to have seen it speak of strange rituals that may bring the Fire's Fury to the vindari.

SKALAN

Although Skalan is very open to outsiders, the hauntlings there still prefer to gather together into their own neighborhood, sarcastically called "The Graveyard" by other residents. The People of Ash effectively rule over the small collection of homes, with Grandmother Bellace (see **Leadership**) leading the People in turn. Members of the community who are not People have little voice, bringing almost every adult in the Graveyard under Grandmother's banner.

Unlike other gatherings of the People of Ash, the Skalan group accepts outsiders into their circle and the neighborhood they control. These members are neither hauntlings nor even natives to Vathak, instead accepting a few immigrants from Rosuto-Shima as prisoners in the same cycle of rebirth.

Grandmother has long worked with the Many Masks (see [*Shadows over Vathak: Colonies - Game Master's Guide*](#)) but that relationship has been strained by the thieves' recent missions against various religious groups, including the People of Ash themselves. This tense situation has caught several hauntling members of the Many Masks in the middle, forced to choose their loyalties.

Members of the neighborhood speculate endlessly behind closed doors about Grandmother Bellace's death, because her initiation easily predates them all. Most stories cast her as an elven noblewoman, either burned by her own

people for their ancient rites or being killed by the coming of the vindari. However, if that is the case, Bellace hates her old people with a passion. Although Skalan may accept elven refugees from the mainland, it seems Grandmother never will.

LEADERSHIP

Like most hauntling communities, gatherings of the People of Ash usually have an informal democracy that ultimately coalesces around one charismatic leader. For all but the smallest groups, dissenting opinions are swamped as soon as the leader speaks. However, dissatisfied members are generally allowed to go their own ways and, if they are sufficiently charismatic, form a group of their own.

Beyond local cells, the People of Ash have no overarching network. Although they all read *The Litany of Ashes* and many even revere the same holy sites, such as the Kovan Barrens, no one can claim overall leadership of the society.

GRANDMOTHER BELLACE

Over ninety years old, **Grandmother Bellace** (NE female venerable hauntling bard [dirge singer^{ERGH}] 7) is hunched by the weight of years and even paler than most hauntlings. She speaks only to dole out punishments or warn the young away from her interests, but can more often be found singing wordless, mournful tunes. Her voice carries the weight of magic as well as the curse of the caoineadhs^{ERGH}, so it is a weapon she saves for weighty situations.

Bellace's enforcers handle most of her day-to-day work: maintaining order in the Graveyard, solving disputes with leaders of other neighborhoods, and making sure no elves cross her path. Bellace encourages them to more brutal heights, doling out hardship within her community and Skalan as a whole to bring out the best in their targets.

When Bellace calls on outsiders, it's often to push back against the larger gangs in the city. She will sometimes pay mercenaries with information or favors, but prefers to reward them potions of her *cure* and *inflict* spells. With the Many Masks becoming an increasing problem, chances are she'll be reaching out soon.

^{ERGH} this archetype and racial variant can be found in [Enhanced Racial Guide: Hauntlings](#).

THE FOREMAN

Recognizable by his ornate mask among the functional leather coverings of his comrades, **The Foreman** (N/LE male hauntling vigilante^{UI} [zealot^{UI}] 11) serves as the leader of the camp north of Edhelion and his own spy network during his days as just another charcoal burner. Although most of his followers are true believers, even those with doubts are too frightened to bring them up when the Foreman might be listening.

During his fiery speeches, the Foreman often invokes the spirits of the romni killed in the Kovan Barrens. Although it was a mysterious conflagration consumed them, he focuses his ire on the vindari that drove them to that point. The ghosts, rippling like heat in the desert, loom behind the Foreman during his speeches, marking him as the chosen of the Fire's Fury.

Unlike other leaders in the People of Ash, the Foreman has begun sending his followers abroad. There they spread copies of *The Litany of Ashes*, recruit hauntlings into the People, and inspire existing groups to follow the Foreman's lead.

^{UI} this class and archetype can be found in *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Ultimate Intrigue*.

SARKARA

A performer first, **Sarkara** (N female hauntling cleric of Tel'egoth 6) is often found wearing flamboyant dresses and stage makeup to accentuate, rather than hide, her hauntling pallor. Now, however, she spends little time in front of crowds. Instead, she writes and directs many of the Struck Oak's plays and occasionally treats noble clients to seances enhanced by her phantasms^{ERGH}.

It's well-known among Auld's People of Ash that Sarkara remembers being a young father trapped in his burning home, dying in a purge by Lord Kanaras's Physicians while clutching his daughters to him. She's even located the burnt out ruins of that home, purchasing the property and leaving it as a macabre reminder of a life lost. Every few weeks, she heads to the ruins with spirit coal^{ERGH}, attempting to catch a glimpse of her lost daughters.

Although the Auld gathering has yet to formally stand against Lord Kanaras, Sarkara may provide secret assistance to those who seek to unseat the vindari lord. She may even hire adventurers to disrupt his plans, but will be careful to do so without revealing her identity.

^{ERGH} this feat and item can be found in [Enhanced Racial Guide: Hauntlings](#).



OTHER MEMBERS

Most members of the People of Ash are simply hauntlings looking to find meaning and a community of their peers. Born as outcasts with experiences very different from their birth parents', hauntlings often seek out their own kind and the People of Ash are one of the few organizations where they gather.

BITROS VINLER

Bitros Vinler (male NG hauntling commoner 2/rogue 1) is a member of Sarkara's sect in Auld, but someone like Bitros can be found in almost any gathering of the People of Ash. He's lived a hard life up to this point, fleeing first from his own kin, then the church's inquisition. The inquisition's scars still criss-cross his pale skin as a quiet reminder that outsiders are not to be trusted.

His initiation into the People of Ash was so rushed and so desperate that other members of his gathering quietly doubt his claimed memories of smoke and fire. However, since his initiation, he's ingratiated himself to Sarkara and proven himself frighteningly loyal. He frequently takes it upon himself to test new initiates, either tailing them to verify their claims or even challenging their memories during their own initiations.

Bitros does his best to avoid contact with vindari, but the inquisition still has records on him after all these years. It's always possible he draws their interest again, particularly if missionaries in Auld begin turning up tortured to death.

ECHO

Wearing a mask decorated with subtle patterns of gold leaf, **Echo** (female N hauntling aristocrat 4) is the most easily recognized member in Edhelion's camp other than the Foreman himself. She displays stunning connections to the city's nobility, pulling strings to get hauntling

performers jobs at noble courts and even getting imprisoned members released on one occasion.

Although Echo supports the Foreman publically, many members of the group ask her to intercede on their behalf when they worry that they've angered him. Eager to curry her favor for just that eventuality, members of the group jockey for permission to help on her own projects. Some of these assignments are simple matters of investigating prospective members, but the investigations just as often poke into the lives of Edhelion's nobility and merchants.

Echo's identity is something of a mystery, despite the fact that a hauntling with connections to the nobility should be relatively easy to track down. Some claim she's a secret lover of Lord Mayor Ralderhorn (see [Shadows over Vathak: Gamemaster's Guide to Ina'oth](#)), while others whisper that she disguises herself as a romni woman to pass among the nobility. A few paranoid members even claim her disguise skills are so great that she's the Foreman hiding in plain sight.

MATSUGI

Skalan's People of Ash are drawn from far and wide, but few from so far away as **Matsugi** (male LE dandasuka rakshasa^{B3}). As the only member of Skalan's cell older than Grandmother Bellace, he's treated as a respected elder despite his predilections for garish jewelry and violent outbursts.

Trusted members of the Skalan cell know of Matsugi's true form: a twisted creature of fangs and bloodlust the size of a svirfneblin. He's even gathered a few young disciples who believe he represents a soul more refined by the fire than themselves. The most talented of these disciples carry his gifts, themselves raktavarna rakshasa^{B3} in the form of blades or amulets.

Although Matsugi works as one of Grandmother's enforcers, his bloodlust extends into nearby neighborhoods as well, with his disciples gathering up those who will not be missed. Beyond these bloody desires, Matsugi believes that there are more souls like him abroad in Vathak and seeks trusted agents to seek them out on the mainland.

^{B3} these monsters can be found in *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Bestiary 3*.

PURPOSE

Although every cell of the People of Ash are inspired by the Litany, each group chooses which pieces of the text to embrace and even which version of the text it considers canonical. Three themes weave through the book, however: understanding the hauntling condition, protecting hauntlings, and tempering iron with flame.

The origin of hauntlings is a question that keeps many hauntlings and even some outside philosophers up at night. *The Litany of Ashes* suggests that the strongest souls are reborn in new bodies after their death, becoming hauntlings in their next life, while weaker souls fade away.

The People of Ash don't typically proselytize, even to other hauntlings, but see hauntling life as inherently beautiful and valuable. Even those whose previous lives ended in betrayal or choking waters can count on the People's support. This help comes at a hidden cost, however, as the People consider hauntlings who stand against them to be the worst sort of traitors.

"Tempering iron with flame" is a metaphor the Litany uses for causing hardship. According to the text, every hardship inflicted refines its victim's spirit, making it more likely they will return as a hauntling rather than dissolving in the cold mists of time. Some People of Ash use this as an inspiration to become heroes themselves, taking

on other's suffering to further purify themselves. But many more inflict suffering on others, whether to make the world a better place or just for their own secret enjoyment.

Although all People of Ash swear by the Fire's Fury, a name for the Old One Tel'egoth, only a handful are truly dedicated to its cause. Unlike in many societies, these devotees are spread through the ranks. Clerics, oracles, and even warpriests of Tel'egoth can be found in positions of power, as lay members of gatherings, and among the countless solitary People of Ash.

INITIATION

Initiations into the People of Ash are described rather clearly in *The Litany of Ashes* and tend to follow the same lines throughout Vathak. The initiate is brought before the gathered membership to relate their memories of the fire that ended their previous life and forged them into their new hauntling self.

Should the members accept this tale, and there is rarely reason to reject one, the initiate is invited to present something they find valuable. Although this is sometimes of material value, the intent is for the initiate to choose something of value only to themselves, like a family heirloom or an original work of art. This item is then burned as the ritual's leader reads the section describing its destruction from *The Litany of Ashes*. The initiate is smeared with the still-warm ashes of the item as they swear by the Fire's Fury to uphold the virtues of order (see **Purpose** above).

After the consistent formal ritual, different cells have varying traditions. Raucous parties are surprisingly common as a momentary break from the hauntlings' traditionally subdued days, but secretive cells scatter like mist after new initiations and particularly public cells hold subdued parties or potlucks. Solitary members tend to complete

their ceremonies quietly, letting a fire burn out in their hearth or the ruins of a burned home.

METHODS

Although most members of the People of Ash are relatively normal hauntlings, the most dedicated members of the society draw on the society's teachings and their faith in the Fire's Fury to perform incredible feats. Members who have lost faith will find that these feats no longer work as they are expecting.

FIRE'S TEMPERING

Fire improves your focus and tenacity even as it burns your flesh.

Prerequisites: Tempered Soul, hauntling, member of the People of Ash.

Benefit: When you take at least one fire damage, the next time you use the Tempered Soul feat does not deal you damage. No matter how much fire damage you take, you can only store one free use at a time.

GRACE OF FIRE'S FURY

Your love of fire allows you to use torches as a graceful weapon.

Prerequisites: Dex 13, Weapon Finesse, member of the People of Ash.

Benefit: You treat a torch as a light weapon that deals bludgeoning damage equal to that of a light mace of its size, plus fire damage equal to your Dexterity modifier (minimum 1), and you do not incur penalties as you would for using it as an improvised weapon.

Normal: A torch used in combat is treated as a one-handed improvised weapon that deals bludgeoning damage equal to that of a gauntlet of its size, plus 1 point of fire damage.

GRACEFUL BRAND

Careful application of flame can be a tool for healing as well as pain.

Prerequisites: Dex 13, Grace of Fire's Fury, Weapon Finesse, member of the People of Ash.

Benefit: As a move action when wielding a torch as a weapon, you can deal 1 fire damage to yourself or an adjacent ally. This removes any bleed condition from the creature damaged.

REKINDLE SOUL

Fire's kiss can bring you back from the brink of death.

Prerequisites: Hauntling, member of the People of Ash.

Benefit: When your hit point total is below 0, fire damage instead has a restorative effect as though an *inflict* spell for the same amount had been cast on you. This healing stabilizes you as normal.

Healing this way causes tremendous strain to your body and, once you heal from a source of fire damage, you cannot regain hit points by this or other means until you rest for a full 24 hours.

TEMPERED SOUL

Your spirit has been forged and reforged through countless trials.

Prerequisites: Hauntling, member of the People of Ash.

Benefit: As a free action when you are affected by a mind-affecting spell or spell-like ability, you may act normally (ignoring any statuses or penalties caused by the spell) until the beginning of your next turn. When you do this, you suffer 1d4 damage per level of the spell, which cannot be reduced by DR or other means.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

In addition to the hooks provided with the **Leadership** and **Other Members** above, there are hooks that can appear anywhere there are People of Ash.

- The People of Ash approach a hauntling, dhampir, or even wretched PC as a potential ally. At first they just pass on a few pages from *The Litany of Ashes* discussing the hauntling condition, but return later to explain that the vindari church has been targeting them. Even if the PCs know the full nature of the People of Ash, many innocent lesser members and unrelated hauntlings are likely to die in the purge as well, unless the group takes a side.
- A local cell leader (such as the Half-life Heretic from *Faces of Vathak: Survivors*) has begun including more esoteric signs and lore into his initiation ceremonies, hoping to bring new members closer to the Fire's Fury. He instead succeeds at the opposite, calling servants of Tel'egoth into the ceremony chamber, either menacing PC initiates directly or escaping while he scrambles to cover up his mistakes.
- A group of People of Ash work to temper the residents of a neighborhood or even small town, conspiring to bring hardship after hardship on the community. Food stocks and homes are burned and the resulting disease outbreaks light the night with flickering funeral pyres. Through it all, the People of Ash try to push the residents into conflict with a nearby bhriota tribe to redouble the suffering and, therefore, temper both sides' souls further.

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