

Background

This story takes place in a world which is an approximate cultural and technological analogue to 19th century Europe—but with the addition of improbable steampunk tech and magic. The world is populated by generic fantasy races such as elves, dwarves and goblins; as well as some staples of the D&D setting: the drow, the yuan-ti and the illithids. All of these races have traditionally been portrayed as supernaturally evil villains. In this module, assume that they both have reasonably normal, functioning societies (if not particularly nice ones—but neither was ancient Rome!) and that the ludicrously evil excesses usually attributed to them are either nasty human propaganda or memories of a less civilised time.

Drow

These estranged **cousins of the elves** inhabit a vast network of **underground caverns** in the area. Their **matriarchal** society is divided into several **houses**. Today, their frequent infighting is more likely to take the form of **sophisticated political intrigue** than open warfare, but they're not above a bit of **sabotage and assassination**.

Drow worship a **goddess** known as the **Dark Lady**. **Spiders** are believed to be the Lady's favoured creatures, and thus they are revered in drow society and frequently kept as **pets**. Some spiders found in the underground reach **enormous sizes**.

Like elves, most drow are able to call upon some form of **innate magic**.

Yuan-ti

Since the dawn of history, the yuan-ti have been **remaking themselves** using their magic-enhanced **bioengineering skills**. They worship a **snake deity** which they call the **Great Serpent**, and they are still seeking the **perfect blend of humanoid and reptilian** qualities to pass on to future generations. Exactly what this blend is, and how they will know when they have found it, is a subject of constant philosophical debate. Different families have **very strong opinions** about how this search should take place.

Some yuan-ti look **almost human**, and they usually serve as the **public faces** of their families when they need to negotiate with outsiders. Others have prominent **snake-like** characteristics—such as a snake's tail in place of legs, or a snake's head—and some look almost completely like snakes. Regardless of their appearance, they are all able to speak their common tongue—one full of **sibilants**, of course.

A few decades ago, the yuan-ti nation endured a period of political instability owing to years of rule by **Zissarthaz the Mad Emperor**, whose nickname was entirely deserved. He was eventually overthrown in a coup, which greatly improved the nation's relations with its neighbours.

Illithids

Illithids are a **psionic race** whose reputed abuse of their mental powers and parasitic relationship with other sentients has led to their persecution and isolation throughout the ages. They **ingest brain matter** for its nutritional value, although despite a common misconception it can be provided by non-sentient livestock.

More disturbing is their means of **reproduction**: the asexual, genderless adult illithids spawn octopus-like **larvae**, also

colloquially referred to as **tadpoles**, which after a period of gestation in proximity to an entity known as an **elder brain** must be implanted into a **living sentient host**. The larva burrows into the host's head, devouring its brain, and rapidly grows to **replace its entire head**. The host body becomes physically stronger and healthier.

The resulting entity usually retains **none of the host's memories or personality**, but exceptions occur. Hope of this very unlikely outcome is what drives the **uneasy symbiosis** that modern illithids have established with their neighbours in some urban centres. Those who are extremely old or gravely ill have **little to lose** in such a desperate gamble.

Illithids do absorb the memories of other illithid brains that they ingest. **Elder brains** are very old illithids who have eaten many others and whose bodies have **atrophied** over time—they live suspended in tanks of cerebral fluid. They are known to be particularly **powerful psions**. At the end of its lifespan, every illithid offers itself to its community's elder brain, adding its own knowledge to the shared pool. The brain uses its psionic abilities to share some of this wealth with other illithids in the community, and with the larvae that gestate in its tank.

Humans

These **resilient omnivores** can survive almost anywhere, and are found all around the world. Human settlers **migrated** into this area from the **north** at the behest of nobles wishing to **expand their territory**. Ultimately this expansion plan proved more trouble than it was worth—but although the northern cities **abandoned** their colonies, the colonies proved to be quite tenacious.

The largest surviving human settlement in the **south** is the city of **Snakesford**. In the **north**, the dominant political power is the **Northern Union**, a collection of human city states, elven nations and dwarven kingdoms which have formed a close alliance.

The dominant human **religion** in the south is the faith of the **Two Gods**: the Mother, the goddess of the sun, life and light; and the Father, the god of the moon, death and darkness. This religion has also been **adopted** by most urban **goblins**, who have come to interpret the animal totems worshipped by their ancestors as facets of the Mother.

In the **north**, humans have increasingly become influenced by the **culture of the elves**, and in recent centuries the faith of the Two Gods has been **sidelined** in favour of various interpretations of the **elven religion** and its large pantheon. An extreme example of this is the **militant Order of the Sun**, which reveres the **elven sun god** in his **wrathful** aspect above all others.

Technology

In recent decades, arcane **devices that combine magic and mechanical mechanisms** have become more commonplace. The difficulty of creating and maintaining the magical systems which often power these devices has made **mass-manufacturing rare**, but hardly a year goes by without some crazed sorcerer or inventor unveiling a new creation.

The most common mode of transportation is the **horse-drawn carriage** (for the wealthy) or **foot** (for the less wealthy). **Oxcarts** are used to move goods. **Autocarriages** are curiosities—many Snakesford residents will have seen one, but children will still come out to stare.

Airships have recently been invented, but the few examples seen in Snakesford have been finicky prototypes, prone

to drift back to earth or get blown off course by the wind.

Revolvers, pistols and rifles, firing **paper cartridge ammunition**, have become standard issue for the military and police, replacing swords and bows as the primary weapons used by such forces. Ordinary citizens and criminals might own guns too, although the **expense of maintaining them** and manufacturing ammunition has thankfully limited their use.

Revolvers commonly have **six shots**. **Rifles** are breech-loading and **single-shot**.

Snakesford

Once a semi-permanent camp at the **intersection of a busy road and a river**, **Snakesford** grew into a fortified town. In earlier times, it was perpetually defending itself against raids from **yuan-ti to the south** and **drow underneath**, and on a few occasions was the unwilling host of **territorial disputes** between the two. Eventually, however, the three civilisations began to resolve their differences more **amicably**, and Snakesford became a convenient **trade hub**. Soon it **cut all ties of fealty** to its distant parent cities in the north, and became **independent**.

Today it is a **bustling and prosperous** human city, although one with a reputation for **decadence, crime and corruption**. It maintains somewhat **cold diplomatic relations** with the **Northern Union**. It has a much **closer relationship** with the nations of the **yuan-ti** and the **drow**, which are right on its doorstep. Many drow and yuan-ti have **purchased land** in Snakesford, and now occupy entire **neighbourhoods**. The **demographics** of the city have shifted, and humans barely maintain their historical majority.

The city is run by a **council of lords**, which comprises a few dozen **hereditary nobles**. In recent years, noble titles—and thereby seats on the council—have been **granted to commoners** who have made a significant contribution to the economic wellbeing of the city. Titles are **inherited** according to the law of **equal primogeniture**: children inherit before siblings, and gender is irrelevant.

As a body, the council is motivated mainly by **profit** and a desire to **maintain the status quo**. **Only humans** may sit on the council, but exceptions have been made for certain persons of mixed blood, and wealthy drow and yuan-ti are known to **“own” certain councillors**.

The **Order of the Sun** has spread even to Snakesford, where it has found **support among humans** who believe that the city should be **purged** of its unsavoury elements: criminals, corrupt nobles and merchants, and usually also anyone who **isn’t human**. Once an easily dismissed **fringe group**, it has gained some **powerful backers** and has become increasingly **brazen** in its activities—openly styling itself after ancient **military orders of knights**. The **Northern Union** embassy has been accused of **aiding** the order in an attempt to **destabilise** the city, and the order’s followers are suspected of practicing **illicit fire magic**, but neither of these allegations has ever been proved.

A lot of **technological innovation** in the city has been driven by **goblins** finding **workarounds** for technologies on which the old city guilds held **monopolies**. Their success eventually led to the **guilds’ obsolescence and demise**. After competition between the goblins and the guilds erupted into **rioting** in the streets, the council sided with the goblins and all the **guilds were banned**—with the exception of the **Guild of Mages**, which is permitted to exist under a **special charter** in exchange for its absolute **loyalty** to the council.

Magic use is heavily regulated. Use of **powerful raw magic** within the city limits is **almost entirely illegal**. Magic is available to the **general public**, but only through **enchanted items** and **potions** which have a controlled and predictable effect. The **Guild of Mages** polices magic use among **humans and goblins** with an **iron fist**. **Drow and yuan-ti** are free to use **their own magic** on their **private property**, but they need **guild permits** in order to practice it in the rest of the city, or to **sell magical products and services** to human and goblin citizens. Of course a **thriving black market** exists, and there is widespread off-label use of common potions.

A few decades ago a **small illithid temple** was established in a poor neighbourhood in the city. It has attracted very few followers other than the old and infirm.

Over the past few years Snakesford has been negotiating a significant **trade agreement** with the Northern Union. This treaty is important because it represents a **thaw** in the relationship between the two nations. In the past they have come perilously close to **outright hostilities**, although fortunately the spectre of war has been kept at bay by the **long distance and inhospitable terrain** that separate them.