

## **DAWNFORGE: SETTING, BACKGROUND, AND STORY FOR ZANGALA REGION**

To the people of Ambria, Zangala is a mysterious realm of danger and deadly secrets. The tieflings of Valhedar have tamed the barren Azran Desert, but the lands south of the Blackscale Mountains are known only to the bravest explorers—and few of them have lived to tell what they've seen.

When the world was young, Zangala was home to countless intelligent races. But most of those races are gone now, and those that survive are mere shadows of what they once were. For today, everything that lives south of the Azran Desert is part of the yuan-ti empire.

Just south of the Blackscale Mountains, the desert foothills turn to grasslands, where tall gray-green hill grass sways in the ever-present wind. For more than a century, the Empire of Valhedar has tried to claim these lands, but without success. Settlers trying to farm the rich soil have had to face constant attacks from the yuan-ti, who strike without warning from the shelter of the grass. Valhedaran soldiers venturing into the grasslands usually return either empty-handed or not at all. There are also reports of “wind madness,” during which settlers claim to hear voices or otherwise be driven to distraction by the constant sound of wind and rustling grass.

South of the grasslands lies a vast, lush savanna that the Valhedarans have not even attempted to tame. The savanna is dotted with wide, shallow lakes and slow-moving rivers that support herds of antelope, elephants, and dire oxen. These herds are hunted not only by the yuan-ti, but by tigers, worgs, and giant snakes as well.

The most dangerous predator of the savanna, however, is not an animal but a plant. Sincarsis, also known as “murder grass,” looks like a patch of normal savanna grass, though a bit taller than a man. But the edges of the grass blades are razor-sharp. When its victim is well within its patch, the sincarsis moves its blades, slicing the prey into bite-sized chunks. The meat is absorbed into the soil, where it nourishes the plant's roots.

Yuan-ti savanna settlements are often surrounded by sincarsis, so anyone who approaches by the wrong path runs a serious risk of ending up as fertilizer.

The savanna gradually gives way to dense jungle and thick marshlands—and every last acre of this land is full of life. Primates, colorful birds, and lean jungle cats make the towering trees their homes and hunting grounds. Enormous insects nest in the jungle caves, and swarms of swamp bats burst out of the bogs at sunset.

Beyond the near-infinite variety of predators, explorers face more danger still in the form of sinkholes, wide stretches of quicksand, and yuan-ti traps designed to capture food and enemies alike.

### **The History**

In the days before days, when water and ice still covered much of the world, the almighty serpent Zalaph brought his children, the yuan-ti, to conquer the world in his name. The ancient texts say little of from where the yuan-ti came, but speak only of the “black lake” and the “unseen moon.”

Zalaph gave his children the secrets of fire, agriculture, architecture, potions, and magic. In return for this knowledge, he demanded blood sacrifice. At first, the yuan-ti offered their dark god their own blood, and countless yuan-ti lost their lives on gore-encrusted altars. But as they grew in population and power, so did Zalaph's hunger. So the yuan-ti invaded the lands of those around them, capturing thousands of prisoners for sacrifice.

As millennia passed, the yuan-ti were caught in an ever-expanding cycle of conquest. As they spread their empire in search of sacrifice, they required more power. Zalaph gladly gave them the power they needed, but in return demanded more sacrifice.

Two thousand years ago, the cycle was finally broken. Zalaph first grew complacent in both his demands and his blessings, and then went silent. Zalaph had fallen into a dreaming slumber.

Without Zalaph's demands to push them further outward or the god's power to fuel their conquests, the yuan-ti abandoned their empire's northern outposts and fell back to their home continent of Zangala. The empire turned decadent. Its priests looked to other gods in the shadowed corners of the universe. Worship of these *talazur* (literally, "black gods") became common. A new, weaker breed of yuan-ti was spawned, then rejected.

Now Zalaph is stirring once more. The yuan-ti are preparing to strike out northward once more, not only to reclaim their former glory, but to claim all of Ambria as an offering to their dark lords.

### **The People**

Zangala is dominated by the yuan-ti, which are divided into four breeds. A yuan-ti's breed determines his caste and role in society.

The azir (called "abominations" by outsiders) are the rulers and chief priests of the yuan-ti. Because of their snake-like bodies, they are considered closest to Zalaph, and speak for him in all things.

The elzir (called "half-bloods" by outsiders) are the administrators and generals of the empire. Their brilliance makes them natural leaders, but their caste ensures they can never usurp their masters, the azir.

The onozir (called "pure-bloods" by outsiders) make up the rank and file of the yuan-ti armies and workforce. They are the merchants, craftsmen, and scholars of the empire. While they are locked into their caste, there is a great deal of vertical mobility within the onozir, and they can be quite wealthy and powerful.

Finally, the lozo (also known as "thin-bloods") are the lowest, most despised caste. They are the most human-looking breed, the misshapen result of degenerate acts so blasphemous, they offend even the yuan-ti. Many would argue that the lozo are not even technically part of the caste system. They are counted amongst the unholy masses, the impure races that exist solely to serve the yuan-ti as slaves and sacrifices.

Unlike the other slave races—and unlike even the other yuan-ti—the lozo are often not willing to accept their lot. They are quick to revolt, and some of the least-deformed have even passed themselves off as onozir to live as normal a yuan-ti existence as they can. Other rebellious lozo have set out northward, looking to make new lives for themselves outside the yuan-ti empire.

Because of their near-human appearance, a few lozo have been trained as ambassadors and spies and sent north to deal with the men of Ambria. The chief priests figure that the rulers of Valhedar and Arenland will respond better to emissaries who don't look like snakes.

There are countless other races on Zangala, but the vast majority of them are all kept by the yuan-ti as slaves. Lizardfolk, troglodytes, and halflings are the most common slave races. Humans used to be kept as pets, but most were killed during an ill-fated uprising during the last century. The few who remain are bred for slavery in the plantations, far from the yuan-ti cities.

### **Settlements**

The yuan-ti are an intensely urban people. Their settlements are vast, cosmopolitan cities sprawling for miles through the jungles and savannas of Zangala. The stone-paved streets form ritual patterns that can only be seen from above. Intersections of three or more streets are marked with wide plazas occupied by towering idols and lined with vine-covered temples to Zalaph or the talazur.

Temples are everywhere in yuan-ti cities, and no two look alike. Some are cathedrals topped with twisting black spires; others are squat, blood-stained ziggurats; still others are smooth, towering pyramids crawling with ancient runes that seem to move when studied. Some talazur have designed their own temples: strange, bulbous structures with angles that unsettle the nerves, and frescoes that have no solid shape, yet fill the mind with unspeakable dread.

Beyond the temples, yuan-ti cities commonly have hundreds of shops, restaurants, and “pleasure dens” where opiates and other pleasures of the flesh await those who can afford them. Other common sights include schools where the young learn the trades of their castes, hatcheries where the young are raised from egg to adulthood, and the pits where slaves are kept and bred.

Slaves are essential to the yuan-ti way of life. For each city, there are hundreds of plantations, quarries, and mines—all manned by slaves—dedicated to keeping that city supplied with food and raw materials.

### **Language**

The yuan-ti language is a soft, hissing language unsuitable for shouting. Even in the midst of a marketplace crowded with a thousand haggling yuan-ti, one could hear a dog barking.

Part of the reason for the quietness of the yuan-ti language is that they communicate much by visual cues. The same words may mean five different things depending on the position of the speaker’s head, eyes, tongue, or tail.

The priests of the talazur must learn the hard, alien tongue of the black gods in order to communicate with them. Knowledge of this language is precious, and is never learned without a price—sometimes gold, but more often blood, or time spent in apprenticeship to an elder priest.

Yuan-ti about to visit the outside world as ambassadors, spies, and assassins learn all the languages of the region they will be visiting. Languages come easily to them, though many have trouble eliminating their hissing accent.

### **Governance**

The yuan-ti empire is a theocracy. It was ruled by the priests of Zalaph in the past, and will be again. It is currently ruled by the priests of the talazur, for they have been blessed with supernatural power and gifts that allow them to blackmail, curse, kill, or otherwise remove those who oppose them. Rivalries are common between the various talazur priesthoods, for they cannot stand to share power.

There is no central government of the yuan-ti empire. Each city is its own independent state, ruled by one or more high priests. Traditionally, a single high priest of Zalaph ruled each city, and in that way Zalaph himself was the emperor of the yuan-ti. When Zalaph fell to slumber, however, his high priests lost much of their power to the priests of the talazur. Now that he is awakening, the cities are ripening for power struggles.

The yuan-ti are divided into castes based on breed. The azir are the ruling caste who give commands, the elzir pass the commands along, and the onozir actually carry out the commands. The much-despised lozo thin-bloods are not officially part of any caste. At best, they are ignored by the other yuan-ti. More commonly, they are thrown in with the other races to serve as slaves or sacrifices.