

# ZATAL - THE MOUNTAIN OF FIRE

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# INTRODUCTION

Mount Zatal was once considered the center of the True World when the ever-expanding Empire of Nexal seemed unstoppable. Zaltec, the bloodthirsty Eater of Hearts, has manifested his power more than once in the rumblings of the mountain's fiery belly.

Zatal's significance is not that of a simple symbol, however, and there are secrets within the mountain that very few could even guess at. There are miles and miles of tunnel systems, mostly formed by the natural effects of lava, but others have been carved by intelligent hands. These tunnels hold entire societies of their own – many who have no contact with the world outside of the volcano.

Though it is not a “dungeon” in the traditional sense, the world existing just below the surface of Mount Zatal is ripe for discovery and adventure. The tunnels and chambers could be explored for months, with only a small percentage of the mountain's secrets ever being revealed.

## TWR AND MAZTICA ALIVE!

The “Maztica Alive!” community has been in existence since 2014 and there are many products now associated with it. All of them can be found by following the link below.

<http://www.dmsguild.com/product/171534/TWC1-The-Maztica-Campaign-Guide>

The community, however, has recently started a new “phase” in its existence. The tag on products with this phase is “TWR” which stands for a “True World Resurrection.” This is an adventure path where the ending goal is to bring the mother goddess of the setting, Maztica herself, back to the world so long after her brutal murder. Though this adventure can be run independently, it is recommended that the players have at least gone through *TWR3 The Door of Stars* – otherwise, the DM might need to make some adjustments in the adventure.

So far, the following TWR products can be found on the *Dungeon Masters Guild*.

TWR1	<i>The Sea Demon's Pearl</i>
TWR2	<i>The Maztican Ball Game</i>
TWR3-E	<i>The Lion and the Fox</i>
TWR3	<i>The Door of Stars</i>

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*Zatal – The Mountain of Fire* is intended to serve a number of purposes. First and foremost, there is an adventure that concludes the aforementioned adventure path. In future “Maztica Alive” products, history will assume that either the PCs or other adventurers are successful in resurrecting Maztica allowing her to once again become a full-fledged member of the True World pantheon. Only key encounters are detailed in this product and the DM is free to expand upon the adventure as he or she sees fit.

Zatal is also introduced as Maztica's answer to Faerun's Undermountain – a megadungeon with unlimited expansion capabilities. The Heart of Maztica and Zaltec himself may lie at its core, but there are thousands of mysteries found in its tunnels and caverns that not even the gods know about. Zatal is designed so that it can be its own campaign if the DM so desires.

## HOW TO PLAY

The adventure portion of this book is not designed to run like a standard adventure. It is designed as a “sandbox” where the PCs can lead the adventure's direction. However, *Zatal – The Mountain of Fire* has key story based encounters which lead to the completion of the “TWR” adventure path. The DM may add encounters as he or she sees fit and may also remove others that aren't essential.

Note that there are new creatures found in this book which are given statistics at the adventure's conclusion. Other creatures can be found in the various bestiaries for Maztica Alive (*TWC5*, *TWC6* and *TWC7*), in addition to the *Monster Manual*, but most are reprinted here.

## HISTORY OF ZATAL

Much like Zaltec's greatest pyramids, Mount Zatal has grown over the ages. The pyramids, however, grew because new architecture was placed atop the old in order to forever expand upwards. Zatal on the other hand, has grown from within. Like a boil or abscess, there is a poison deep in the core of the mountain which literally pumps its evil, life-corrupting magic forever outwards and upwards.

### THE HEART OF MAZTICA

Maztica is both the name of the continent and of its inhabitant's deceased mother goddess – some say that the two are in fact one and the same. Though it is widely accepted that the goddess' husband Kukul created mankind, she was known as the true source of life and highly favored among the people for her role.

Her son Zaltec resented Maztica's popularity and though he did not seek the love she received, he sought an equitable level of fear. Zaltec, the Eater of Hearts and Bringer of War, wished to be exalted above all others. In order to accomplish this feat, he created and then gifted *hishna* magic to mankind. *Hishna* was a brand of magic which tapped into the inherent power of claws, fangs and talons and the resultant power allowed man to flourish and war in Zaltec's great name.

Disgusted at what her son had wrought and the resultant cost to life, Maztica created *pluma* magic. *Pluma* was an equivalent magic of feathers and life that she passed to her son Qotal, who then in turn passed it on to mankind.

Infuriated over the loss of worship, Zaltec approached his mother in a fit of rage and beheaded her with his great dark macuahuitl. The weapons fine edges shattered on impact, and its black obsidian tips lodged themselves deep within both the head and body of the goddess. Some elders have claimed that this was the original source of the existence of plumastone across the body (continent) of Maztica, and while that has yet to be proven, it is certain that a force known as the Darkfire (sometimes Darkfyre) was born that day.

Zaltec left his mother's corpse but took from her a still beating, corrupted heart from which he would occasionally feed. Instead of sating his hunger, Zaltec only sought more, and from that day forward, Zaltec yearned for a fresh flow with a far greater hunger than ever before.

Zaltec brought the Heart of Maztica to a valley in what is now known as the Valley of Nexal. He took it deep underground to a natural cavern where its veins naturally took root and flared with the corrupting force of darkfire. To this day, it beats an irregular beat that manifests as the rumblings of a semi-active volcano. Mount Zatal began to grow, quickly at first, but soon slowing to only a foot or so each year. Over thousands of years, Zatal's reddish-orange glow became the most prominent feature in the True World's horizon for many miles. In conjunction with the great city of Nexal, Mount Zatal eventually became the heart of an empire, and perhaps the whole of the True World itself.

Zaltec's involvement in the region was mostly kept secret, but the Bringer of War's brothers did not sit by entirely idly. The Lake of the Gods formed not long after the mountain dominated the valley, and it is the will of Zaltec's brothers manifested in the physical world.

### THE VIPER OF ZATAL

The continent of Maztica had a history that existed long before even the gods arrived on Toril in their prehistoric forms and created the race of man that have come to dominate it. The creator races once graced these lands, first in the form of the serpentine sarrukh, then the amphibian batrachi and finally among the avian aeree. The sarrukh may have been long gone from the world upon mankind's arrival, but there were still remnants scattered in the darkest regions.

An individual sarrukh once known as Mixcoatl slept an age-long sleep in the very cavern to which Zaltec brought the Heart. Its darkfire energies (and the god's not inconsequential presence) woke the slumbering serpent and awed the ancient being. It is unknown what kind of deal was brokered on that day, but the sarrukh, now changed by the corrupted life

energy of the Heart, agreed to serve as its guardian forevermore. Mixcoatl assumed the name, "The Viper" and has secretly had a hand in a number of events that have been falsely attributed to Zaltec himself.

## DAWN OF AN EMPIRE

Far to the north of Zatal, a people who actually referred to themselves as the Mazticans, lived in caves and communities in a dryer, less fertile land. Unbeknownst to the majority of mankind, Zaltec had decided that this unlikely group would be his chosen people. The Eater of Hearts manifested his image to a Maztican shaman named Tecco, and commanded him to lead his people south.

Zaltec chose Tecco knowing full well that the Mazticans would obey, as Tecco was known for his detailed and accurate visions. For his whole life, Zaltec had guided the shaman.

The Mazticans were many thousands strong and they eventually came to the Valley of Nexal, which at the time had three cities already established near the base of Mount Zatal and the shores of the Lake of the Gods.

The three cities were known as Tezat, Azatl, Zotil and when the Mazticans arrived, all three maintained a precarious balance of power. If one grew too powerful, the others would join forces to reestablish balance. The situation had remained under these circumstances for many decades.

The Mazticans initially served as a major boon for the city's inhabitants. They accepted menial work for the slightest of wages and only settled in waterlogged lands unwanted by the majority of the populace. Their knowledge of war was also known to be exceptional and the Mazticans were not greedy with their knowledge.

After a number of years, and a strategic betrayal, the Mazticans came to dominate Azatl, Zotil and Tezat. Within a few decades of their arrival, the newly declared Empire of Nexal spread beyond its valley, and the mixed inhabitants came to refer to themselves as Nexalans with great pride.

It wasn't long before Zaltec established his utter dominance as the primary god of the entire empire. Many sacrifices were made in his name,

and the flow of fresh hearts consistently fed the vile god. On one occasion, after the ascendance of a new emperor (known as a Revered Counselor), a paltry sacrifice of one-thousand hearts was offered – inciting Zaltec's anger. He awakened the Viper who had become attuned to the corrupted life-magic of the Heart of Maztica and with its power, caused the eruption of the volcano. Many more lives were lost and Nexal was burned nearly to the ground.

The Empire of Nexal was undoubtedly the greatest human (human empire, as the scorpionfolk and creator races would attest) empire to ever grace the True World. Yet as powerful as they were, even they could not handle the coming of Cordell, the clergy of the foreign god Helm, and the Golden Legion. Wielding weapons and magic unseen before in the True World, the invading force of Faerunians and their native allies (consisting of Payit and more importantly the long established Kultakan enemies of the empire) decimated the Nexalan Empire and it took far less time than they could have ever imagined. The last of the Revered Counselors of Nexal, Naltecona, was slain, and the invaders trampled upon hundreds of years of history. Hoxitl, Zaltec's high priest, beseeched his god for deliverance and the Bringer of War responded by awakening the Viper once again. Those who were loyal to Zaltec voluntarily wore a symbol known as the Mark of the Viper, and together created the Viperhand Cult.

Through the god's will, interference from the foreign deities Helm and Lolth, and the terrible corrupting magic of the Darkfire, Zatal erupted with magical energies in an event known as the *Night of Wailing*. Survivors of the terrible night fled as the Lake of the Gods boiled, and the men of the Viperhand became orcs, ogres, trolls and new beings known as jagres who could change forms between ogre and displacer beast. Hoxitl became the grandest of them all, towering over even the most massive jagre.

Eventually men returned to the Valley of Nexal, but only the most vile and unwanted. Life in the heart of the once great empire became short for the children of Maztica and Kukul.

## THE DESCENT

The True World has seen its share of upheavals in recent centuries, and the Night of Wailing should have been the worst. Alas, it would not be so. When the repercussions of Cordell's invasion and the creation of the Viperhand finally settled, what might have been considered a "new normal" was established. Faerunians became a somewhat common sight, particularly in the settlements of Helmsport-Ulatos, Trythosford, Tukan and a number of others. Mazticans managed to maintain their old ways and in some cases learned much from the invaders. They could certainly not have handled the Viperhand without the assistance of Cordell's Golden Legion, but that was hardly consolation for what had been done to their land and culture.

When all seemed normal, the sky one day began to shimmer and warp. Those who stared into its wavering form grew nauseous, but within moments the effect abruptly stopped. The sky, however, had changed from its normal bright blue to a steely gray – unlike any that had ever been seen before.

Clerics of the gods sought answers immediately from their deities but the only response they received from the gods was silence – cold, empty nothingness. They knew almost instantaneously that the gods had either abandoned them, or were somehow cut off from their prayers.

The repercussions of this event were of course felt across the True World, but in the Valley of Nexal, where the beasts ruled and mankind was reduced to an eternally fearful shadow of themselves, a new upheaval was set to occur. Hoxitl had begun to taste divinity himself, but he too could not hear the voice of his patron. Thinking his master displeased, Hoxitl organized a massive assault on the remaining human population of Nexal. Much like the Feathered Wars of old, every orc, ogre and troll was instructed to incapacitate instead of kill. Thousands of humans were captured and Hoxitl planned a truly grand sacrifice.

In lieu of the standard temple sacrifice, Hoxitl thought it would please his lord to perform the mass sacrifice upon Zatal's caldera. In a single

file, the thousands of slaves marched up the mountainside. Hoxitl made no secret of his intentions – once their hearts were removed and while the body remained semi-living, the offerings would be fed directly in the fires of Zatal!

Hoxitl did not understand that it was not only Zaltec who had grown silent, and the chosen of the myriad other deities had also grown panicked. Though typically somnolent in the depths of their own watery lairs in Zatal, the great rain dragons known as tlalocoatl awoke when they lost the constant hum of their watery lord Azul. As they awoke, they found thousands of men led by not more than a hundred of Zaltec's foul Viperhand near their demesnes. The tlalocoatl, confused by Azul's silence, attacked mercilessly, allowing the humans to escape into hidden tunnels in the mountain. Hoxitl lost his prize that day, but managed to singlehandedly slay an ancient rain dragon. Hoxitl, understanding the depths of his failure, chose to rip his own heart from his chest with his powerful claws and cast it into the bubbling lava. What was left of his retinue observed the great sacrifice and fell to their knees in reverence.

Though the gods were gone, the Heart of Maztica remained deep within the mountain – nurturing the Darkfire and tended to by the Viper. Its corrupting magic emanated once again through the mountain tunnels and slowly changed the escaped humans over the span of a generation. Nothing remains of mankind, though many thousands of grimlocks now roam the upper tunnels.

## AZURE SKIES, AGAIN

For over a century the gods remained silent, and the True World changed in uncountable ways. Threats both new and old hardened its inhabitants, and mankind found new ways to defend themselves in the new world. Once again a "new normal" was established with entire generations never having seen the blue skies of Toril.

As it had once been, so it did return. The shimmering and warping began once again as it did a century past. The grey, steel sky slowly

changed to azure once again, and in the event known as the Sundering, the True World had found its way back to Toril.

Though they had long slept, the gods returned, and Zaltec was the first to awaken. The god shifted in the grand cavern beneath Zatal and the mountain rumbled.

*\*The events following Zaltec's awakening immediately following the Sundering can be found in the novella **TWNI Azure Skies**. This novella can be found elsewhere and can allow the reader to get a feel for Maztica as it now stands. The massive stone avatar of Zaltec depicted in the novel also appears at the conclusion of this adventure.*

## THE ADVENTURE

If the PCs have completed **TWR3**, the adventure starts immediately after its conclusion. The druidess Malinalli can give the players the secret historical background of Zatal to an extent. She is one of only a few who knows the source of the Darkfire, but she doesn't know about the Viper or any of the other inhabitants of the mountain. She tasks her heroes with recovering the Heart of Maztica from the mountains depths and to do so she provides them a few items that can help.

If the PCs have not completed **TWR3**, they can still participate in the adventure - simply assume that another group managed to acquire the *Risa Stone* but perished in the process. Without the *Risa Stone*, Zaltec himself would physically attempt to prevent the resurrection (in the final encounter).

Malinalli provides each PCs with a feather of fire resistance. Worn somewhere on the body (typically in hair), these red feathers provide fire resistance without the necessity of attuning to the item, but only retain their magic for a month. They were crafted by plumaweavers in service to the goddess.

She also gives them a stone that grows warmer to the touch as the holder gets closer to the Heart of Maztica. The signals are easy to determine and the stone will unerringly lead the PCs through the miles upon miles of lava tubes and

tunnels in Zatal. The stone also has a single teleportation use that leads directly to the Sunstone in the House of Tezca desert. Once the PCs acquire the Heart, they are instructed to use the spell where she will be waiting to perform the resurrection of a goddess.

The adventure begins in the Valley of Nexal, a blasted land full of monsters and the dreaded Viperhand cult of beasts. While most of these encounters can be skipped by stealthy or cautious PCs, they are available should the players decide to explore.

## VALLEY OF NEXAL

Four cities (including the capital, Nexal) once graced the Valley of Nexal but all but one lies in a state of ruin. The Beasts of the Viperhand survive in the region due mostly to a food source known as axayacatl supplemented with meat from captured humans and the small amounts of remaining game in the region. Axayacatl is a large water bug found by the millions in the now foul smelling Lake of the Gods. Orcs harvest the water bug with massive nets and pound the creatures into dough. They are often cooked in lime water and put into mayz husks before eating.

The valley itself was once quite fertile, but the eruption of the Night of Wailing ruined most of the agriculture (not that the beasts were prone to farming). Vegetation has returned, but the valley itself still looks as bleak as it did in the years following Zatal's eruption.

Below are descriptions of each city and additional features of the valley. The DM may expand on them if the PCs wish to explore further and entire adventures could be had within some of these sites. Exploring the Valley of Nexal is not truly necessary for the completion of the adventure.

### AZATL

Azatl was once the center of the remaining human population of Nexal after the Night of Wailing. It was known to be a city of scoundrels – consisting of the dregs of society both native and foreign born. After the Spellplague, the

jaagre Hoxitl ordered the beasts of the Viperhand to surround the city as trolls and ogres captured the thousands of men and women. These folks were marched up the side of Zatal, their hearts meant as an offering to Zaltec.

Before the first sacrifice was performed, rampaging tlalocouatl inadvertently freed the humans. Many were killed by the rain dragons and the Viperhand, but thousands escaped into the tunnels of the volcano. The humans survived in the tunnels, never again to see the light of day even though they primarily remained in the uppermost caverns. Over time, the evil energies of the Darkfire transformed these men and women into the grimlocks that now inhabit Zatal.

Ironically, the immigration of these humans to Zatal displaced rat-like creatures of fire known as rylkar who then overran Azatl. Now the city is crawling with these fire rats, and not even the Viperhand finds any use in entering. Anything that could burn is now long gone, but there are rumored treasures that the rylkar have not yet destroyed.

### Rylkar Nest

If the PCs enter the deserted city of Azatl, all that is left of the deserted homes is stone and adobe, where there was once straw, lime and clay as well. Most of the roofing is gone and what could once be found inside has rotted and become worthless.

If the PCs insist on searching the ruined residences, you should roll a 1d6. A result of 1 means they find 1d4 gold quills (5 gp each) that were left behind in a long ago raid.

On a roll of 2 or 3, they come upon a rylkar nest. Rylkar are mean spirited rat-like creatures that have been displaced from Zatal by the grimlocks.

The map provided details a typical rylkar infested ruin. In the provided example, the aboveground part of the home is a mess of mud and rotted thatch. In a corner of the home, the PCs may find a 3 foot square hole that leads into the darkness. Steps lead downwards about 10 feet into what was once a hidden temple to Qotal. The former resident was one of the few worshipers of the forbidden deity that could be found in Nexal, but he is long gone. The doors

are still in place, but easily broken off their hinges and 3 foot diameter holes can be found in the base of each which the rylkar use to travel from room to room.



**Room 1.** This area will begin to give PCs an indication of the foulness of what they are soon to find. The ground is soaked from recent rains that have flooded this part of the temple and the water is fouled and crawling with small vermin. Regular rats occasionally swim through the muck feasting on the worms and roaches. PCs who are foolish enough to attempt to drink any of the water must make a DC11 Constitution save or contract *sewer plague*. It takes 1d4 days for sewer plague's symptoms to manifest in an infected player. Symptoms include fatigue and cramps and the infected creature suffers one level of Exhaustion. It also only receives half the normal number of hit points from spending Hit Dice and no hit points from finishing a Long Rest. At the end of each Long Rest, the player

must make a DC 11 Constitution saving throw. On a failure, they gain another level of Exhaustion and on a success they lose one level of Exhaustion. If Exhaustion is brought below 1, the player recovers from the disease.

**Room 2.** The horrid stench in this room is overwhelming, and bones are strewn everywhere. The room is also brimming in two **rylkar spawn swarms** that attempt to consume any who enter.

**Room 3.** This used to be the central chamber for rites to Qotal. A statue of a plumed dragon is smashed into pieces (by the rylkar harridan's bulk when it first found the temple). The room is as foul smelling as any of the others and if the PCs search the rubble, three **rylkar madclaws** smash through the door from Room 4 to the attack.

A DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) or DC 17 Intelligence (Investigation) check will locate a secret door behind where the statue once stood that leads to other areas within the city that were sympathetic to Qotal once long ago.

**Room 4.** This is the lair of the rylkar madclaws and if the PCs were attacked by its occupants in Room 3, there is only one remaining. This **rylkar madclaw** is barely alive, having been the runt of the four – it has recently been fed on by the others and it only barely clings to life as its entrails are spilled within the chamber. The rylkar here have collected a few baubles that they have kept hidden from the harridan, which hardly ever leaves its chamber anymore. In total, there are 13 pieces of jewelry made of bone, beads and pretty, but worthless stones. Only one, made of tiger eye and jade, is worth anything and could likely be sold for 250 gp.

**Room 5.** This is the chamber of a **rylkar harridan** and its two **rylkar tormentor** guards. Here it rolls in its own filth and will not even bother to attack until one of its tormentors is slain.

Once it is slain, the PCs may move its bulk and find the treasure which it lays upon. Doing so, however, exposes them to a particularly virulent strain of sewer plague which only requires contact with the harridan's body and a failed DC

15 Constitution save to contract (though subsequent recovery saves are still DC 11).

The treasure consists of 40 filthy gold quills (200 gp) a dozen assorted small gems in a rotted pouch worth 50 gp each, and a small hishna talisman in the shape of an eagle's claw which can cast *cure poison* once before becoming nonmagical.

## TEZAT

Tezat has been a ruin for longer than any of the other cities. It is a smaller city than Azatl, and what is left of it has effectively become a holding pen for sacrifices to Zaltec. Five jagre overseers command dozens of trolls, ogres and hundreds of orcs who keep captives miserable, but at least alive. The only remaining structures are made of stone, and even those are only loosely held together. There are frequent escapes and rebellions, but the jagre are brutal in putting down organized resistance. There has not been a mass uprising in a decade.

The PCs may want to attempt to free slaves in Tezat, but spending too much time in the ruined city is most certain suicidal. Bands of roaming **Viperhand orcs** (1d8+1) led by **Viperhand trolls, Viperhand ogres**, or even one of the five **jagre** overseers is commonplace. If PCs lose a member of their party, a replacement could be found among the prisoners.

For every hour the PCs spend in Tezat, roll 1d6. A roll of 5 indicates one of these bands of creatures and a roll of 6 indicates a band with a prisoner in tow. Entering any of the dilapidated buildings also forces one of these rolls. There is little treasure to be found in this hellish prison.

## ZOTIL

Zotil was destroyed by lava when Zatal erupted and has never been rebuilt or unburied. During and after the Spellplague, however, orcs that approached too closely began to disappear. Hoxitl would assign orcs who angered him to "guard" the Nexalan city as a particularly cruel form of punishment.

The humans of Zotil were killed almost instantly on the Night of Wailing when lava poured into its streets. The dead sat silently