

The Isle of Zariq

This is a tiny volcanic island around 4½ kilometres (2¾ miles) in its largest dimension, set in the Frigid or Equine Ocean some 750 km (470 miles) off Errynor in northwestern Alarius. It is the exposed tip of a great seamount that reaches up from the seabed, around 930 metres (3,050 feet) below. A second small seamount island, Zaraq, considered a twin to Zariq by the native undersea peoples here, lies about 130 km (80 miles) to the east of Zariq.

Zariq is volcanically active, and continues to grow during each fresh eruption. For all its isolated northerly location, heat from the many small volcanic vents means that while snow falls here in winter, it rarely lies for long before melting, and the sea nearby never freezes. This also means mists and fogs are common, when conditions allow, which combined with particles from the volcanic smoke, promotes considerable rainfall here and nearby over the sea.

The apparent geography is somewhat misleading, as most of the island's surface sits above what is essentially one of the main rising magma pipes that created the entire seamount. The current solid surface conceals that quite well, although the quantity of at least semi-active lava craters, geysers, smoke and gas-escape fumaroles certainly hints at the reality. Part of the magma pipe is underwater off the eastern coast - the line of the offshore Tooth & Claw Reefs hints at the pipe's full extent. Other magma pipes from the seamount are active only underwater, opening up to several kilometres/miles from Zariq, though none are very far below the surface (all less than 150 m/500 ft below the waves).

The symbols and "mountain" names too are misleading, since as the map scales suggest, for all their rugged cragginess, the central uplands would barely qualify as hills on the mainland in terms of height. The highest, Lodestone Mountain, rises only about 100 m (330 ft) above sea level. Similarly, despite its relative profusion (thanks to the excellent fertility of the fresh volcanic soils), the vegetation cover consists of generally low-growing, often wind-stunted and twisted, shrubby trees, none taller than 6 m (20 ft). In places where more recent lava flows have run, often to the sea, few surviving trees remain, commonly only dead ones, or stumps. The land recovers after such events quickly however, with fresh moor-like grasses and other plants colonising within a few years, followed by the first low-growing sapling bushes.

Most of the trees and bushes are hardy types that produce flowers, seeds and fruits (typically small, berry-sized ones) in season, as they were brought in by birds or a rare passing ship in the distant past. The deciduous kinds are commonly thorny as well. Seabirds of various types make up most of the island's more obvious living inhabitants, if primarily during their spring-summer breeding seasons. The warm, snow-free terrain lengthens the period the deciduous foliage remains, and encourages some birds to linger, so that even in the depths of winter, a few flocks can be found here sheltering. Apart from a range of small insects, arachnids and other invertebrates, all non-poisonous, the island has no other native wildlife on land, though the seas nearby are as rich in typical lifeforms as anywhere else around the northern oceans. The fairly shallow Warm Bath lagoon is particularly fecund.

Very rarely, a few Kachaya (Sea Devils) may surface to look over the island briefly, as the seamount nominally falls within their Twin Peak Province. There are also some non-native, but naturalised, creatures here. Any land surface visitors may encounter a very rare flying snake or two, flitting about among the vegetation, or even less commonly spot a large, brown-furred rat (larger than a normal rat, these are roughly the size of a medium cat). The flying snakes are venomous.

The snakes or rats are more likely to be seen if any of their masters are about, the Kobalts, a tribe of small, cold-blooded, reptilian humanoids, with blue scales (more or less the same as the Kobolds of D&D). Around 200 of them live in tunnels beneath Kobalt Mountain, on whose higher western slopes they have also built a tower as a handy lookout station. Despite the cold, they have a relatively good lifestyle here, with no predators beyond the occasional large seabird attack on a lone young, or injured, tribe member.

Quite how the Kobalts got here is unclear. They are not sailors, and none - now at least - are winged. Their own legends about this vary. Sometimes the tribe is said to have begun as a small winged group fleeing from persecution; or a group that flew too high, were caught in a terrifically powerful aerial river and dropped here by chance; or they were always wingless and were banished here magically by a great sorcerer; or some variant incorporating one or more of these themes. Where the tale has them winged, subsequent generations have always bred wingless (although they can live for over a century, a generation is more typically 20-30 years, the average life-expectancy). Their arrival was always a vague "many generations ago" in the tales, with the implication of "we've always been here", something clearly not the case. Their numbers remain quite low, as despite the volcanic warmth of their tunnel home, the northerly clime is not conducive to their survival.

They have no memory of where the flying snakes came from. The snakes are a tropical species, brightly coloured, and survive here only thanks to the Kobalt tunnels. There are around three dozen of them currently. They can and will obey simple commands by tribe members, and will happily come to food offered them by anyone small and blue-coloured. While they will defend themselves and any tribe members they were near when attacked, self-preservation is their higher priority.

The rats have been selectively bred larger than normal by the Kobalts, from a small pack of shipwrecked ordinary brown rats. Smaller rats are killed and used as food, meat being too precious to waste here. There are roughly 25-30 adult rats currently, and in general are used a little like Humans would use dogs. The rats are too small to be ridden by any other than the younger Kobalts and hatchlings (Kobalts are egg-layers).

Named Map Features

Crater Range

A series of active and inactive minor volcanic craters dominate this area, which is where most of the lava flows have originated in recent times. In places the ground surface is thin and fragile, and without warning will give way under the weight of a creature much heavier than a Kobalt, possibly dropping them into lava below, or perhaps just a painfully hot sub-surface hollow. The Range is normally wreathed in mist and smoke.

Fire Moors

The most recent major lava eruption from Crater Range flowed through here a couple of decades ago, and down into the sea. The land vegetation has already begun recovering, though numerous dead trees and stumps, and fewer still-living mature trees in spots sheltered from the flow, dominate the view. Young saplings are beginning to encroach from either side of the flow region now as well.

Kobalt Mountain

Home to the Kobalt tribe, in their series of subterranean tunnels carved into it. The main access entrance to the tunnels is quite well hidden, on the mountain's southern flank (the map marker is clearer for GM's convenience). A lookout tower has been built higher on the craggy western slopes, constructed to look like just another rough, inactive, volcanic chimney, unless close, careful attention is paid to it (again, the map marker is simply to clarify its location for the GM). Minor volcanic vents pass through the rock here, warming the Kobalt's home, and passing smoke into the air, as elsewhere across Zariq.

Lodestone Mountain

The highest volcanic "peak" on Zariq, reaching about 100 m (330 ft) above sea level. It is often wreathed in smoke and mist from its own, and other nearby, volcanic vents. It stands so tall partly because its rock has an unusually high iron content, to the point where magnetic compasses on the island or within a few kilometres/miles of the peak - even out at sea - will point towards the mountain, not magnetic north.

Tooth & Claw Reefs and the Warm Bath Lagoon

The eastern part of the Zariq seamount's main surface vent extends out under the sea from the island, and the fringing reefs and islets mark the rough outer edge of that vent. Fresh smoke, and occasionally lava flows, occur here at times, and not necessarily just along the Reefs. As the name suggests, the Warm Bath lagoon within the Reefs is always notably warmer than the seas beyond it, sometimes bubbling in places because of escaping volcanic gases, sometimes because the water is actually boiling. Any surface vessel larger and heavier than an unladen row-boat will almost certainly have its bottom ripped-out trying to cross anywhere on the line of the Reefs due to submerged rocks and crags. For all its dangers, the nutrients and warmth of the water means sea life here is in great abundance all across the Warm Bath and onto the outer side of the Reefs.

Other Map Features

The Coast

There are no beaches here, just volcanic rocks running into the sea. However, the mouths of some of the streams have broken up enough of the inland rock to form softer, if still quite glassy (sometimes sharply so), surface cover, where, for example, a safe landing by boat might be more readily made. In places, the rocks form low coastal cliffs too, usually just a few metres/yards above sea level even so. The surface tends to be bare of most vegetation beyond lichens, or seaweed where the tide allows, and a few patches of scrubby grass, particularly in places sheltered from the prevailing westerly, salt-laden, winds.

Streams

The watercourses on Zariq are all of sizes typical for fairly minor streams and brooks if on the continental mainland. With a few exceptions (those where the coastline indents strongly along the line of the stream), the line of these is not firmly-fixed, as the next major lava flow is apt to force a shift in any stream's course, especially further inland. They are important in helping maintain the quantity of larger vegetation types and bringing down fresh soil nutrients from the island's volcanic heart.

Central Uplands

The middle of the island is ringed by vegetation, but is bare of almost all surface life, being a mix of flatter lava plains with various surface textures, and craggy upstanding terrain features, including craters, fumaroles and geysers. Occasionally, the surface may crack and spill fresh sheets of lava across everything low-lying nearby too.