Orium dragon lair for five 7th-level adventurers

From the steamy jungles of the south come rumors of the Alabaster City, a place lost to the mists of time, where every citizen was a sage and powerful magic fulfilled every whim of the city’s denizens. No explorer can claim to know the location of the city, but lizardfolk wearing strange alabaster jewelry have been captured recently. Eager to save their own lives, the lizardfolk said they served an orium dragon named Zanathakla. She lives in the bottom of a vertical cave deep in the jungle known as Tulkau Shayn (“Gullet Cave” in the lizardfolk’s dialect).

The captive lizardfolk claim that Zanathakla doesn’t know where the Alabaster City is either, but she searches for it day and night and sends bands of loyal lizardfolk far and wide to look for it. So far, they have found the ruins of several smaller communities, and Zanathakla says the city will soon be theirs.

**Background**

**History DC 14:** Zanathakla made Tulkau Shayn her lair about a year ago and quickly seized control of a large tribe of lizardfolk, which now treat her with reverence approaching outright worship. Most of the lizardfolk are in the jungle looking for clues to help find the vast ruins called the Alabaster City, because Zanathakla is obsessed with claiming the ruin’s secrets for her own. Only a few of her followers are guarding Tulkau Shayn at any given time.

**History DC 19:** Gullet Cave has long been the source of superstition among the indigenous humans and lizardfolk. A stone outcropping resembling teeth runs along the north edge of the cave mouth, and the cave itself is 200 feet deep. For years, brave youths have crawled to the edge of Tulkau Shayn and peered into the inky blackness below. But until Zanathakla moved in with the lizardfolk tribe, no one knew how deep the cave was—or if it even had a bottom.

**Hook: Discover the Alabaster City**

Somewhere within the deep jungle lie the ruins Zanathakla seeks—the last remnants of the Alabaster City. People living near the jungle, or in the safer areas around its outskirts, know many rumors about the city but few facts. If the characters can find the location of the city, they might be able to recover what remains in its vaults, or the greater treasures of forgotten knowledge that lie in the vast libraries rumored to exist within the city.

**Quest XP:** 1,500 XP (major quest).

**Hook: Recover the Trade Goods**

A massive nearby river that winds through the jungle carries many merchant ships to towns and cities that dot the shoreline. The creatures under Zanathakla’s command have begun attacking these merchants, usually taking preserved food and drink. They have also been known to steal tools. The river merchants ask the characters to retrieve their stolen goods and to end the threat of the lizardfolk raiders. See the descriptions of areas 2 and 7 in the following text for information about the items that belong to the traders.

**Quest XP:** 300 XP (minor quest).

**Environment**

Tulkau Shayn is a deep, vertical cave. The entrance opens in the center of the cave’s ceiling, and the space within drops straight down 200 feet to a flat, rocky floor. The cave walls angle slightly outward; viewed from the side, the cave looks like an upright cone with the top chopped off.

Several side chambers branch off from the main chamber. Until the lizardfolk constructed the wooden pathway that spirals down the interior cave walls, those chambers were home only to flying creatures—mostly bats and stirges—that would ascend out of the cave each day to find food in the jungle.

**Illumination:** If there’s daylight outside, the top 50 feet of the cave are in bright light and the next 50 feet in dim light. It’s dark at the 120-foot mark, where the second encounter, “Stirge Chamber,” takes place.

**Walls:** The cave walls are rough and have many handholds and footholds, but they slope outward, making a climb more difficult than it would otherwise be. Unless otherwise noted, climbing the cave walls in either direction requires a DC 20 Athletics check.

**Side Chambers:** Most of the side chambers don’t contain encounters. Once the characters defeat the guards at the cave mouth, they have to pass a dangerous cave inhabited by stirges and gricks before reaching Zanathakla and accessing Tulkau Shayn’s treasures.

Eventually lizardfolk search parties will return to the cave, but they might be too disheartened by Zanathakla’s death to fight. (Or perhaps they’re mad for vengeance; you make the call.)

**Area 1: Cave Entrance**

When the characters make their way through the jungle and finally reach Tulkau Shayn (see the “Approaching the Cave” skill challenge on page 100),

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**CONTENT**

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**Area 1: Cave Entrance**

When the characters make their way through the jungle and finally reach Tulkau Shayn (see the “Approaching the Cave” skill challenge on page 100),
they find the cave’s entrance guarded by lizardfolk that revere Zanathakla.

**Tactical Encounter:** “Cave Entrance,” page 102.

### AREA 2: LIVING CAVE

About 50 feet down inside the cave, connected to the entrance by way of the lashed wooden scaffolding the lizardfolk have built, is a large cave that serves as the lizardfolk’s main living chamber.

When the PCs enter this cave, read:

*The lizardfolk’s bedding—mostly furs and fronds—lies in piles along the walls of this cave. In one corner, barrels contain fresh water and dried meat. In the center of the chamber lie several felled trees, rough wooden planks, and carpentry tools. The planks match those used in the walkway outside. A stone altar stands against the far wall, topped by a reddish statue of a dragon.*

The barrels of food and water and the carpentry tools were stolen from river traders and can be returned as part of the “Recover the Trade Goods” minor quest.

**Ceiling:** The ceiling is 15 feet high along the perimeter of this area, rising to a peak of 25 feet near the chimney.

**Treasure:** A crude stone altar against the far wall holds a jade carving of a dragon worth 250 gp. The lizardfolk have smeared reddish mud on the idol to make it look more like Zanathakla, but a cursory examination reveals the jade underneath.

### AREA 3: STIRGE DEN

This cave of pesky stirges has been easily bypassed by the lizardfolk, but now gricks also lurk inside, making it difficult for the characters to descend deeper into Tulkau Shayn.

**Tactical Encounter:** “Stirge Chamber,” page 104.

### AREA 4: ARTIFACT CAVE

Zanathakla and the lizardfolk keep the evidence of the Alabaster City in this side cave, which is 50 feet above the main cave floor and accessed by way of the wooden walkway. The artifacts include several chunks of alabaster masonry and stonework: cornices, column sections, and so on. Dozens of ceramic urns and pots litter the room, all painted in a distinctive zigzag pattern.

When the PCs enter the cave, read:

*Ceramics and chunks of alabaster stonework litter this room, and a map hangs on one wall. Made of pieces of parchment stuck together with tree sap, the map shows the jungle nearby. It’s divided into sections based on natural features and shows several ruins. Many of the areas have red “X” shapes marking them. Only a few areas are not struck through.*

The large, patchwork jungle map created by Zanathakla shows civilized communities on the fringe of the jungle and Tulkau Shayn in the middle. Several sketches depict ruins, but almost all of these have “X” marks through them. More important for the characters, the jungle is divided into sections bounded by natural features such as rivers and mountain ridges. It should be obvious to the characters why most of the ruins sections are struck through—and what parts of the jungle Zanathakla and the lizardfolk haven’t explored yet.

This map could be useful to the heroes if they’re engaged in the “Discover the Alabaster City” quest. It doesn’t tell them where to look for the Alabaster City, but it tells them something almost as useful: where not to look.

**Ceiling:** The ceiling is 10 feet high throughout this cave.

### AREA 5: APPROACHING THE BOTTOM

As the characters come closer to the bottom of the cave, Zanathakla becomes aware of their presence. She is careful and cunning, and waits until they reach this point in the cave complex to attack.

**Tactical Encounter:** “Zanathakla’s Wrath,” page 106.

### AREA 6: CAVE FLOOR

Zanathakla spends most of her time sleeping on the cave floor or examining particularly interesting objects discovered by the lizardfolk. Like all orium dragons, Zanathakla is keenly interested in uncovering the secrets of the past. In fact, her zeal has become an obsession, and she spends untold hours coiled up on the cave floor, dreaming of the day when she finds the Alabaster City, builds a new lair in the grandest building still standing, and has her servants bring her book after book full of ancient wisdom.

### AREA 7: TREASURE CAVE

This chamber, level with the cave floor, is where Zanathakla has amassed a typical hoard for a young dragon. It’s a good place for three level 7 treasure parcels: one magic item parcel and two parcels made up of art

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**EXPANDING THE LAIR**

As written, “Tulkau Shayn” is the first step on an adventure that could take the characters to the Alabaster City. As a story element, the cave is a receptacle for a useful clue: the map in the artifact cave (area 4). You can easily turn this lair into a complete adventure site in its own right by enlarging and extending the side chambers. One or more of them could connect to an extensive cave network, full of all the monsters, traps, hazards, and treasure you can manage.
objects and coins. Lizardfolk captured the coins from river merchants who explored too deep in the jungle, and recovered the art objects and the magic item from the ancient ruins they’ve found. The lizardfolk don’t enter this chamber; it is for Zanathakla alone.

If the characters return the coins to the traders (part of the “Recover the Trade Goods” minor quest), the traders compensate them with a magic item of equal value, which is more difficult to sell and therefore less valuable to the traders.

**Ceiling:** The ceiling is 15 feet high throughout this area.

### Approaching the Cave

Getting to Tulkau Shayn is no easy task—the characters must journey across miles of trackless jungle to find the entrance to the deep cave. Each character can attempt up to two skill checks per day.

**Level:** 8 (XP 700).

**Complexity:** 2 (requires 6 successes before 3 failures).

**Primary Skills:** Endurance, Perception, Nature.

- Endurance (DC 14, or DC 8 if the group is under the effect of an Endure Elements ritual): Select two characters in the group at random to make Endurance checks at the start of each day. They attempt to resist the effects of the oppressive heat and humidity, along with the general rigors of an overland hike through the wilderness. A failed check indicates that all members of the group grow weary and lose a healing surge, in addition to counting as 1 failure in the challenge. (If both characters fail their checks, all members of the group lose two healing surges and the characters gain 2 failures.)

- Perception (DC 14, or DC 8 if the characters have a map): The character makes sure the group stays on course—or at least moves in a consistent direction. Success represents a relatively straight path through the jungle, and failure means the characters become lost or travel in circles. This skill can be used to gain a maximum of 2 successes per day.

- Nature (DC 14): The jungle’s many natural hazards—including quicksand pits, bogs, poisonous plants, and thorny undergrowth—can slow forward progress to a standstill. A successful Nature check maneuvers the characters around these hazards, while a failure represents delays as characters extricate themselves from the hazard and takes a longer path around it. This skill can be used to gain a maximum of 2 successes per day.

**Secondary Skills:** Streetwise.

- Streetwise (DC 14): This check can be attempted only once, at the start of the skill challenge, while the characters are still in a civilized area. A character can try to secure a map to aid the party in locating Tulkau Shayn. Succeeding on this check does not count as a success in the challenge, but it reduces the DCs for subsequent Perception checks, as shown above.

**Success:** The characters reach the entrance of Tulkau Shayn. After the final successful skill check, put the characters on the edge of the tactical map of area 1 and start the “Cave Entrance” encounter (page 102).

**Failure:** The characters walk into a monster lair. Choose one of the entries on the table below or roll a d6 to generate a random result. After handling the monster encounter, the characters still haven’t reached Tulkau Shayn. They must repeat the skill challenge as a complexity 1 test (worth 350 XP and requiring 4 successes before 3 failures) to get there. With another 3 failed checks, they become hopelessly lost and are unable to find Tulkau Shayn without first returning to their starting point. However, they might discover some other strange ruin or adventure site deep in the jungle—maybe the Alabaster City itself.

### JUNGLE ENCOUNTERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>d6</th>
<th>Encounter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 grells (MM 144)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 macetail behemoths (MM 31) and 3 ogre savages (MM 199)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 bloodspike behemoths (MM 31) and 3 displacer beasts (MM 70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 spectral panthers (MM 213) and 2 shambling mounds (MM 232)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 trolls (MM 254) and 2 bog hags (MM 150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 berbalang (MM 34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The Alabaster City

The Alabaster City can have whatever traits work for your game, or it can be replaced with a different location you want the characters to go to next. Here are a few possible story hooks for the Alabaster City:

- Once ruled by rakshasa barons, the Alabaster City served as a library for dark lore and a site of ritual sacrifices. Ghosts of those slain still haunt the forgotten city, seeking those who can destroy their former captors.

- The Alabaster City fell into a giant sinkhole long ago and was covered over by the boughs of enormous trees. The great city is now inhabited only by ignorant troglodytes. They dwell amid the smashed alabaster ruins and have destroyed many of the tomes held within, burning them for warmth.

- The land where the Alabaster City lies is part of a worldfall (see Manual of the Planes, page 34) that links the world and the Feywild. When the Feywild’s connection to the site is strong, the city becomes covered in vegetation and dangerous creatures spill over. The periods of Feywild influence last only a brief time, but make the city uninhabitable by civilized creatures.
Zanathakla’s Wrath  
Encounter Level 9 (2,150 XP)

Setup
Zanathakla, young orium dragon (Z)  
2 greenscale darters (D)

As the characters descend into Tulkau Shayn, they attract the ire of Zanathakla, the orium dragon who makes her lair here. They battle Zanathakla while perched on increasingly unstable platforms.

When the characters descend to the 60-foot-high platform, read:

A series of wooden platforms has been affixed to the inside walls of the cave with pegs and wooden beams. Shallow flights of stairs connect the platforms, making a spiraling pathway down into the darkness.

Perception Check
DC 21  
There are alcoves in the rock wall on the far side of the cave, and you can see a twitch of movement in them. There’s definitely something alive in there.

Under ordinary circumstances, there’s no way the characters can sneak down to the alcoves or the cave floor. The wooden platforms creak loudly, and the characters are silhouetted against the open sky above. The characters can’t see Zanathakla. She remains on the periphery of the cave floor, where the platforms block the heroes from getting a look at her even if they have a powerful light source.

The battle begins when one of two events occurs: A character heads down the stairs from the 60-foot-high platform, or a character spots the creatures in the alcoves to the south (the greenscale darters) and attacks them. Zanathakla flies up through the middle of the cave, lands on a platform, and breathes at the biggest cluster of enemies she can find.

Zanathakla (Z) Level 9 Solo Soldier  
Young orium dragon  
Large natural magical beast (dragon)  
XP 2,000

Initiative +9  
Senses Perception +9; darkvision

HP 392; Bloodied 196; see also bloodied breath

AC 25; Fortitude 23, Reflex 21, Will 20

Resist 15 acid

Saving Throws +5

Speed 6, fly 8 (hover), overland flight 12

Action Points 2

Bite (standard; at-will) ✦ Acid  
Reach 2; +16 vs. AC; 1d10 + 6 damage plus 1d6 acid damage.

Claw (standard; at-will)  
Reach 2; +16 vs. AC; 1d8 + 6 damage, and the target is marked until the end of the dragon’s next turn.

Stone Rend (standard; usable only while a wall is within reach; at-will)  
Zanathakla tears stones from the walls and throws them: ranged 10; +14 vs. AC; 2d6 + 5 damage.

Draconic Fury (standard; at-will)  
Reach 2; Zanathakla makes two claw attacks and one bite attack, or makes one bite attack and one stone rend attack.

Breath Weapon (standard; recharges when one of Zanathakla’s vaporous spirits is reduced to 0 hit points) ✦ Acid  
Close blast 5; +14 vs. Fortitude; 2d8 + 4 acid damage, and a Zanathakla vaporous serpent minion (see below) appears in any single unoccupied square in the blast. It acts just after the dragon in the initiative order.

Bloodied Breath (free, when first bloodied; encounter)  
Breath weapon recharges, and Zanathakla uses it.

Frightful Presence (standard; encounter) ✦ Fear  
Close burst 5; targets enemies; +14 vs. Will; the target is stunned until the end of Zanathakla’s next turn. Aftereffect: The target takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls (save ends).

Alignment Unaligned  
Languages Common, Draconic

Skills History +10, Insight +9, Intimidate +11

Str 21 (+9)  
Dex 17 (+7)  
Wis 11 (+4)

Con 18 (+8)  
Int 12 (+5)  
Cha 15 (+6)

Zanathakla Vaporous Serpent  
Level 9 Minion Brute  
Medium elemental beast

Initiative as dragon  
Senses Perception +1

HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion.

AC 21; Fortitude 20, Reflex 19, Will 18

Resist 15 acid

Speed 6, fly 4

Bite (standard; at-will) ✦ Acid  
+13 vs. AC; 10 acid damage.

Alignment Unaligned  
Languages –

Str 17 (+7)  
Dex 10 (+4)  
Wis 4 (+1)

Con 12 (+5)  
Int 4 (+1)  
Cha 4 (+1)
Tactics

Part of the challenge for the characters is the acid-damaged platforms along the cave walls, so make the monsters move even when they don’t need to. That will entice the characters to run—and eventually jump—from platform to platform.

Zanathakla prefers to perch on the platform either ahead of or behind the characters, then breathe her corrosive breath. She’s surprised by the damage to the platforms, but she quickly realizes what an advantage it is, and she’s proud enough to taunt characters who are standing on a damaged platform. When one of her vaporous serpents appears, she sends it along with her breath each time she uses it.

Zanathakla fights to the death.

The greenscale darters stay in their alcoves as long as possible, then retreat (either to their alcoves or to the ground below) once they see a platform collapse. The darters try to ascend and escape into the jungle when Zanathakla dies, and they surrender if they can’t escape.

Features of the Area

Illumination: Darkness.

Floor: The cave floor is difficult terrain—a jumble of rocks and bones from Zanathakla’s meals or sacrificial victims thrown into the pit in ancient times.

Stairs: The stairs are difficult terrain for a creature ascending them, but normal terrain for a creature descending.

Platforms: Each section of platform is marked with its elevation above the cave floor. If a creature is pushed, pulled, or slid off a platform, it takes 1d10 falling damage per 10 feet as normal.

DANGEROUS PLATFORMS

The unstable platforms in this encounter make it exciting. You want the characters to have an inkling of what’s going to happen, so make sure you describe the effect of Zanathakla’s breath weapon on the platforms, and track how many times Zanathakla’s breath weapon touches each part of the structure. The breath weapon is a close blast 5, so Zanathakla will often hit multiple platforms and staircases with her breath each time she uses it.

Stunts: Also keep the rules for Acrobatic stunts in mind. Though the base DC is normally 15, adjust it as needed to make this encounter fun. The standard DCs for 7th level are 8 (easy), 14 (moderate), and 19 (hard). Describe various hanging ropes, fortuitous handholds, and other objects the characters can use to move quickly from one section of the scaffolding to another. The rubble at the bottom of the pit can contain handy objects—such as grappling hooks—that a character could use after being removed from the fight by a fall.

Conclusion

When Zanathakla is defeated, the characters are free to explore Tulkau Shayn and have unfettered access to the other locales described in the overview (pages 98–99)—unless you decide to make this lair into a full-blown adventure site, in which case their adventure is just beginning.