

Heroic
3

BURROWING BOUNTIES

4 Difficulty
4 Complexity

A standalone encounter for five adventurers

By Corwin Riddle

Burrowing Bounties is a standalone encounter designed for five 2nd to 4th level adventurers. A mine infested with kruthik has caught the eye of the industrious Forever Endeavor Trading Company, who is looking to hire any adventurers brave enough to sign a contract and exterminate the pests below. The PCs will face off against mutant kruthik, strange eggs, and the mysterious forces of cadbarium gems—all in the name of a little profit.

BACKGROUND

In the rural hills of Eostere, a small mining outpost lies vacant in the dust, surrendered years ago to a hive of violent kruthiks. Since the infestation, several attempts have been made by groups of prospecting adventurers to clear out the mines and capitalize on the gems and minerals left behind, but so far no progress has been made—most have written the mines off as a lost cause. But now, once again, the hills are alive with those looking to claim the treasures below, and this time, the prospectors are determined, organized, and prepared; no lucrative business is too dangerous for the Forever Endeavor Trading Company.

Profit is the name of the game when the Forever Endeavor Trading Co. is involved. Founded by the most entrepreneurial—and opportunistic—minds of the age, the company scours the world in search of exotic goods and unusual oddities, selling its findings at a premium price in markets everywhere. Its merchants monetize monsters, turn demise into enterprise, and ensure that pain almost always equals gain. Adventurers are often hired as temporary employees and given a share of the spoils in exchange for their services; Forever Endeavor always pays up—to them, a contract is considered a fact of inviolable terms.

In a time where double-crosses, duplicitous deals, and uncertain terms determine the fate of many unfortunate souls, the company name carries with it an unflawed record of business professionalism. Once a contract is signed, the terms form an irreversible and irrevocable commitment, sacrosanct in the eyes of a Forever Endeavor employee. Both

parties are expected to hold up their end of the agreement; time is money, after all, and an unfulfilled contract is an undesirable forfeiture—those that put their name down in ink should be aware of the consequences of failure, and, most importantly, remember to always read the fine print.

GETTING THE PLAYERS INVOLVED

Burrowing Bounties can be used as a standalone encounter, or as the basis of an entire adventure. The players could have been hired by Forever Endeavor previously to reinforce the outpost, stumble upon the mine themselves, or be sent there with one of the following hooks:

HOOK 1: AN EGG HUNT

Leading the operation is Brono, a clever, fast-talking half-ling with many places to go and many things to sell. He has done his research and tells the PCs that the kruthiks steer clear of the smell of dead kruthiks, interpreting the bodies as a warning. And so, killing a handful of the hive should be enough to scare away the rest. However, most of the kruthiks are adults and quite powerful, and the risk of losing employees isn't worth the cost of the expected return capital. Instead, Brono has devised a plan to rid the entire area of kruthiks with minimal risk and danger by killing the smallest and weakest kruthiks: the eggs and hatchlings.

Brono and his crew have already found an entrance into the tunnels containing the eggs, and he offers the PCs a contract for the destruction of 6 separate clutches of eggs. That should be enough to drive the remaining kruthiks out of the nearby burrows and mines, allowing his team to venture down below and collect the various gems and minerals.

Brono also tells the PCs that, if attacked, destroying eggs and releasing the smell of dead kruthiks will likely weaken the resolve of any larger, more powerful kruthiks.

Quest XP: 750 XP and 500 gp for destroying 6 egg clutches.

HOOK 2: CADBARIUM INDULGENCE

One of Brono's crewmembers is a dwarf named Gerth, an ornery miner with an uncanny ability to find and identify rare gems and rocks. Deep within the mine, out of Forever Endeavor's reach for the time being, are deposits of cadbarium, a rare gem imbued with a small amount of latent magical energy—most likely, Gerth thinks, the kind of energy that would lure the kruthiks to the mine in the first place.

From what he's observed so far, it appears that the kruthiks have been eating the gems, though he's not exactly sure why—they're potentially toxic to most organisms and have contain no visible benefits. Even so, a kruthik that has eaten a gem will mutate and grow to an unnatural size, all the while glowing a strange blue. The gems are never digested or passed, so Gerth is having a difficult time getting his hands on a large sample that has come in contact with a kruthik—something he believes unlocks the cadbarium energy.

Gerth offers to pay the PCs for bringing back a giant cadbarium gem, most likely found in the belly of a giant, glowing kruthik.

Quest XP: 150 XP and 250 gp for bringing back a giant cadbarium gem.

SPECIAL FEATURES

SPAWNING THE MONSTERS

The egg clutches determine the setup and pace of the encounter; each time an egg clutch is destroyed, monsters will enter the battle. Place them in the initiative order at the time they appear.

- When the first egg clutch is destroyed, the mutated kruthik matriarch will enter from the closest burrow.
- When any egg clutch is destroyed (including the first), 2 kruthik guardians will enter from the closest burrows.
- If a player fails a skill check while attempting to destroy an egg clutch, 3 kruthik swarms spawn adjacent to them.

DESTROYING AN EGG CLUTCH

Destroying an egg clutch requires 5 skill checks:

- All skill checks are made as minor actions.
- A PC must be adjacent to a clutch to make a check.
- Skills include **DC 12 Athletics** (smashing the eggs), **DC 12 Nature** (skillfully aborting the life inside), or **DC 12 Arcana** (overloading the cadbarium below the eggs).
- A failed skill check still counts toward the 5 needed, but only after the 3 premature kruthik hatchlings that spawned are destroyed.

CADBARIUM DEPOSITS

The blue gems protruding from the walls are cadbarium, and can be eaten by any non-minion kruthik to gain a temporary power boost.

- The kruthik must be adjacent to the cadbarium square and spend a standard action to eat it.
- The kruthik gains a +2 bonus to all defenses, all attack rolls, and all damage rolls until the end of its next turn.

| Mutated Kruthik Matriarch | | Level 5 Elite Controller |
|--|--|---------------------------------|
| Large natural beast (reptile) | | XP 400 |
| Initiative +1 | Senses Perception +6; low-light vision, tremorsense | |
| Hive Frenzy aura 2; allied kruthiks within the aura deal double damage with basic attacks | | |
| HP 160; Bloodied 80 | | |
| AC 26; Fortitude 26, Reflex 26, Will 22 | | |
| Saving Throws +2 | | |
| Speed 6, Burrow 3 (tunneling), Climb 6 | | |
| Action Points 1 | | |
| Ⓢ Claw (standard; at-will) | | |
| Reach 2; +10 vs AC; 1d10 + 4 damage | | |
| ⚡ Poison Blast (standard; at-will) | | |
| Close blast 3; targets enemies; +8 vs Fortitude; 1d6 + 5 poison damage. | | |
| Devour Cadbarium (standard; at-will) | | |
| The kruthik guardian eats from a cadbarium deposit, gaining a +2 bonus to all defenses, damage rolls, and attack rolls until the end of its next turn. | | |
| Weakened Resolve | | |
| The mutated kruthik matriarch takes a permanent -1 penalty to all defenses whenever an egg clutch or kruthik guardian is destroyed. | | |
| Alignment Unaligned | Languages — | |
| Str 18 | Dex 16 | Wis 12 |
| Con 15 | Int 4 | Cha 10 |

| Kruthik Guardian | | Level 2 Brute |
|---|--|----------------------|
| Medium natural beast (reptile) | | XP 125 |
| Initiative +4 | Senses Perception +2; low-light vision, tremorsense | |
| Gnashing Horde aura 1; an enemy that ends its turn in the aura takes 2 damage | | |
| HP 46; Bloodied 23 | | |
| AC 15; Fortitude 12, Reflex 12, Will 11 | | |
| Speed 6, Burrow 3 (tunneling), Climb 6 | | |
| Ⓢ Claw (standard; at-will) | | |
| +6 vs AC; 1d10 + 2 damage | | |
| ☞ Poisoned Spikes (standard; recharge ⓂⓂ) • Poison | | |
| The kruthik makes 2 attacks against two different targets; ranged 5; +5 vs AC; 1d8 + 3 damage and the target takes 5 poison damage at the start of their next turn. | | |
| Devour Cadbarium (standard; at-will) | | |
| The kruthik guardian eats from a cadbarium deposit, gaining a +2 bonus to all defenses, damage rolls, and attack rolls until the end of its next turn. | | |
| Alignment Unaligned | Languages — | |
| Str 16 | Dex 17 | Wis 11 |
| Con 16 | Int 3 | Cha 7 |

| Premature Kruthik Hatchling | | Level 1 Minion |
|---|---|-----------------------|
| Small natural beast (reptile) | | XP 25 |
| Initiative +3 | Senses Perception -1; low-light vision | |
| HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. | | |
| AC 14; Fortitude 12, Reflex 14, Will 11 | | |
| Speed 2 | | |
| Ⓢ Claw (standard; at-will) | | |
| +4 vs AC; 3 damage | | |
| Alignment Unaligned | Languages — | |
| Str 12 | Dex 15 | Wis 9 |
| Con 12 | Int 3 | Cha 5 |

GETTING STARTED

Regardless of why the PCs decide to enter mine, read this once they reach the tunnel entrance:

Peering into the black expanse of the mines, you can just make out the faint colors of blue gems, pulsing gently. From the tunnels within you can hear a quiet but incessant series of hisses and chitters, echoing endlessly—it's impossible to tell how many kruthiks dwell inside. The ground of the tunnel is neatly packed dirt, firm beneath your feet, but riddled with many deep holes, as if made by spikes.

AREA: KRUTHIK WARRENS

Read this when the PCs reach the kruthik warrens:

The narrow tunnel opens into a slightly larger cavern, dimly lit by glowing gems embedded in the walls. There is a stale stench; the air feels thick and musty. There are several piles of eggs of varying sizes, but none larger than a foot tall—the eggs rock back and forth, swaying in unison.

An almost inaudible chorus of chirps seems to emanate from the clutches, drowned out by an ominous and much louder sequence of sharp hisses, echoing from each of the many tunnels and passages present.

SETUP

Mutated Kruthik Matriarch
Kruthik Guardian
Premature Kruthik Hatchling

No initial setup. See Special Features for details on when each of the following monsters will enter the battle.

Perception (Automatic Success): The egg clutches are many and appear resilient, but an athletic strike could do some damage. Those skilled in the arcane arts and the ways of nature could also use their talents to abort the creatures inside.

Perception or Arcana (DC 12): Some of the blue gems protruding from the wall appear to give off a strange magical aura—most likely cadbarium. Though it appears useless, you've been warned that the kruthik are somehow able to siphon power from it.

FEATURES OF THE AREA

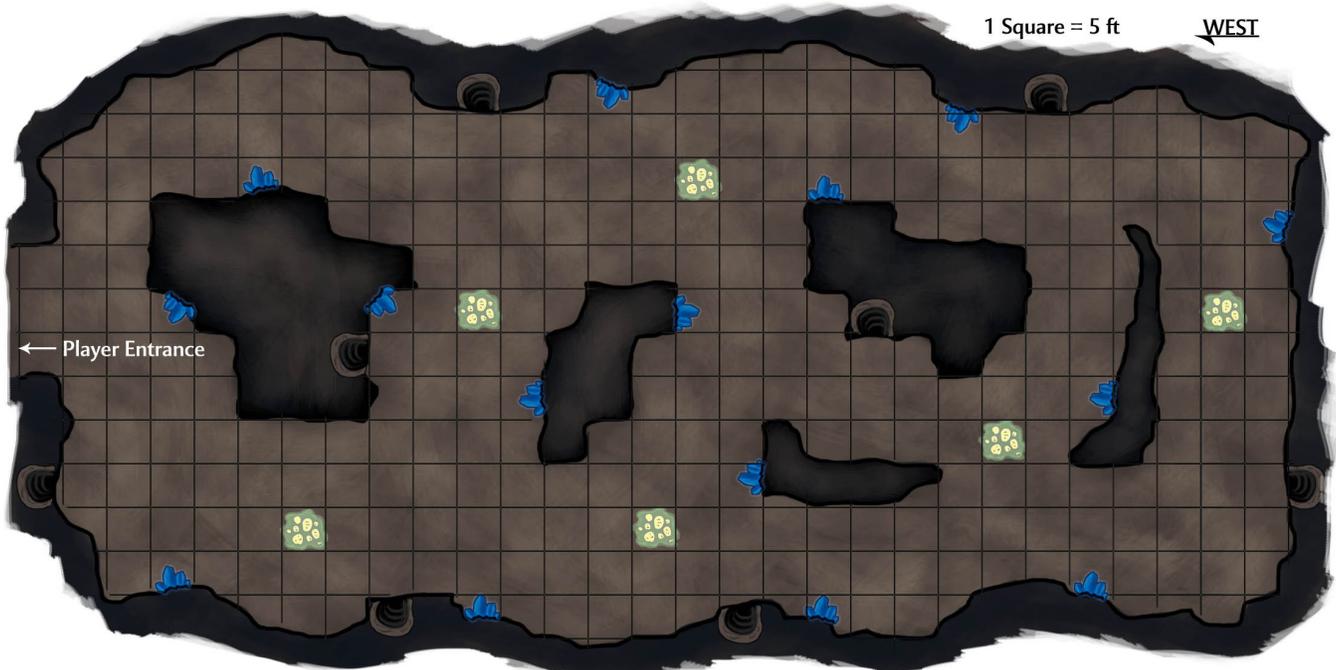
Height: The ceiling is approximately 15' high.

Illumination: Dimly lit by the gems embedded in the walls.

Egg Clutches: Marked as piles of green and white eggs. See *Special Features* for details on interacting with them.

Cadbarium Deposits: Marked as blue gems protruding from the walls. See *Special Features* for details.

Burrows: Marked as brown cave entrances, the kruthik emerge from here.



TACTICS

- The mutated kruthik matriarch appears when the first egg clutch is destroyed, which reduces its initial defenses by 1. *Poison Blast* has no recharge and will be used whenever it will damage more than one PC, otherwise it will take advantage of its reach and use *Claw*.
- All of the kruthiks will attempt to eat cadbarium if wounded and left without a strong attack option, and will burrow under the walls to travel quickly and flank the PCs.
- Although there is no penalty for doing so, the kruthik should all try to avoid areas where the egg clutches have been destroyed, since they are fearful of the scent.
- The kruthik guardians will appear from the burrows closest to the PCs each time an egg clutch is destroyed, using *Poisoned Spikes* immediately and relying on *Claw* until its ranged attack recharges.
- The premature kruthik hatchlings cannot move far, and will simply *Claw* the player that failed the check.

PLAYER STRATEGY

- The PCs determine the pace of the encounter by how fast they destroy the eggs clutches, and should be careful not to overdo it, as the encounter will quickly fill with kruthik guardians and become more difficult.
- The mutated kruthik matriarch begins the fight with extremely high defensive scores, but will take a permanent -1 penalty for each egg clutch or kruthik destroyed. The PCs will have to destroy at least 2 or 3 of the egg clutches before they can do considerable damage to it.
- The skill checks used to destroy the egg clutches are all minor actions, so the PCs can still attack and move as normal.

COMBAT FLAVOR

If you dislike reading powers and effects to your players, give them hints with the following flavor text.

When the PCs disable the first egg clutch, read:

As the eggs burst, the cavern begins to rumble, and an ear-piercing, screeching hiss fills the room. Loose dirt begins to bounce over the cavern floor, and an enormous kruthik, its body glowing a faint blue, emerges from one of the burrows, followed by two smaller kruthiks.

When a PC successfully completes the 1st - 4th skill checks on an egg clutch:

You manage to skillfully destroy a decent amount of the clutch. Many of the eggs become still as the life inside fades, but there are more remaining.

When a PC successfully completes the 5th skill check on an egg clutch, destroying it:

As the last eggs in the clutch shrivel and die, more kruthiks emerge from the burrows, hissing and clicking. The large kruthik rears back, clearly afraid, and its defenses seem to lower.

When a PC fails a skill check:

A few of the eggs burst open, releasing several premature kruthik hatchlings, which begin to attack.

When a kruthik eats a cadbarium gem:

The kruthik quickly devours a nearby cadbarium gem cluster, almost immediately glowing a faint blue and growing in size.

CONCLUSION

All of the kruthiks fight to the death. After they're dead, the PCs can extract the giant cadbarium gem from the mutated kruthik matriarch. The PCs can return to the Forever Endeavor outpost without incident, since the remaining kruthik have retreated. If the PCs honor their contracts with the trading company, Brono will offer them a level 4 magical item as a bonus, in addition to the other quest rewards.

ADJUSTMENTS

If you like this encounter but aren't sure how to fit it into your campaign, here is some advice:

Too few/many players, or too low/high levels:

*The monsters are based on the kruthiks found in the **Monster Manual**, adjust the levels accordingly. Add or subtract kruthik guardians to account for the player numbers.*

It's too easy:

Increase the damage of the mutated kruthik matriarch, and use its burrow ability liberally to attack isolated players. The PCs should fear the matriarch!

It's too hard:

Consider lowering the number of successes necessary for destroying the egg clutches, or getting rid of the defensive bonuses of the mutated kruthik matriarch altogether. If the players are getting overwhelmed, slow down the number of kruthik guardians appearing, down to 1 or 0 depending on the number currently fighting.

We want to play a full adventure:

*Add in some underground terrors found in the **Monster Manuals**, such as centipedes, spiders, or ants—all are the appropriate level.*

