



A QUESTION OF DIGESTION

5 Difficulty
5 Complexity

A standalone encounter for five adventurers

By Corwin Riddle

A Question of Digestion is a standalone encounter designed for five 7th to 9th-level adventurers. Tanglethorn Forest has been invaded by several hungry bulettes, which are devouring everything in sight and bringing a quick end to the forest's wildlife. The players must track down the bulettes and put an end to their voracious appetite—all without becoming tonight's main course.

BACKGROUND

Spanning countless miles and several countries, Tanglethorn Forest is home to a variety of diverse inhabitants—most of them lethal. The forest's once inviting paths and groves have been overtaken by corrupt magic and malicious monsters, becoming a breeding ground for all manner of dangerous creatures—carnivorous frogs, drakes, and vicious apes, to name a few. Its dense foliage, fallen trees, and twisting trails provide both protection and a suitable hunting ground for the predators, which have become overabundant. The fragile balance of nature has been upset within Tanglethorn—the monsters are slowly choking the life out of the area, killing the forest and turning the verdant landmark into a grey and brittle wasteland.

Fighting back against the encroachment is a dedicated group of druids, wardens, and treants known as Nature's Grace. Taking up residence deep within an isolated grove of Tanglethorn, they work to expel the excessive number of monsters from the forest, restoring the balance of nature and bringing life back to the surrounding wilderness. To this end, Nature's Grace has started experimenting with several magical objects capable of driving off some of the lesser predators—enchanted forcefields, automatons, and controlling some of the sentient plantlife—but the forest's denizens were not frightened by such things, and refused to flee.

Hoping to prey on the primal fears of the smaller animals, Nature's Grace created a new magical object called a quakestone—an orb placed in the ground that gives off a subtle, continuous tremor similar to a hunting bulette. At first, the areas around the orbs were quickly vacated, the smaller

monsters afraid of what they believed to be a hungry bulette in search of food. Unfortunately, the quakestone was so convincing that it lured several actual bulettes to the forest, and things are worse than ever. The bulettes have been devouring anything and everything in sight, including the quakestones themselves, and are quickly undoing all of the progress made by Nature's Grace. If something isn't done soon, Tanglethorn Forest will disappear forever—swallowed whole by its hungry inhabitants.

GETTING THE PLAYERS INVOLVED

A Question of Digestion is designed as a standalone encounter, but can easily be turned into a full adventure. The PCs can stumble upon the bulettes' swath of destruction, meet one of the members of Nature's Grace, or intentionally seek out their isolated grove. Once there, you with one or more of the following hooks:

HOOK 1: BREAK THE QUAKESTONES

Aluma is a wilden, a warden, and the leader of Nature's Grace. He was responsible for creating the quakestones and accidentally luring the bulettes to the area. Embarrassed by his mistake, he explains to the PCs that a trio of especially large and hungry bulettes devoured the quakestones and have since remained in the area, eating every animal, plant, or humanoid it can find. Unfortunately, Aluma says, the magical power of the quakestones have made the bulettes bigger, more powerful, and more hungry than usual; he and the other members of Nature's Grace can't handle them.

Aluma asks the PCs to head to a clearing that the bulettes have been known to rest in, and find some way to damage and destroy the quakestones, which now rest in the stomachs of the beasts. The quakestones can be destroyed before or after the bulettes are killed, he says, though shattering one while it resides inside a bulette will have a devastating effect.

Quest XP: 700 XP and 3,500 gp for destroying all three quakestones.

HOOK 2: THE GULLET OF A BULETTE

An elven druid named Velloia has been studying some of the more dangerous creatures of Tanglethorn Forest, and although she's eager to rid the area of the bulettes, she can't help but wonder how they manage to eat so much so fast. Her current theory is that this group of bulettes constantly produce an acidic chemical capable of aiding in consumption and digestion—turning swallowed animals into mush long before they reach the stomach. Velloia has been trying to think of a way to obtain some of this acid, but unfortunately it's only found within the mouth and throat of living bulettes, and she isn't willing to get that close.

Velloia asks the PCs to obtain three samples of the acid for her, and gives each of the PCs an acid-safe vial. To get a decent sample, they'll need to scrape it from the inside of a living bulette—how they accomplish that is up to them.

Quest XP: 350 XP and 1,000 gp for bringing back three samples of bulette's acid.

HOOK 3: SINK THE STINK

A tall and spindly treant known as Longbranch spends most of its time assisting Nature's Grace by patrolling the forest for any problems. While exploring the area occupied by the bulettes, Longbranch noticed that there had been no recent growth in the trees. He explains to the PCs that a common bug known as a stinkgrub works as a potent fertilizer for growing seeds, and the bugs, which are extremely small, are usually trampled and smashed into the earth, catalyzing the seeds below into growth and continuing the cycle of life. Unfortunately, the stinkgrubs are attracted to the tremors of the bulettes and the quakestones, and with no other creatures around to smush them into the ground, the bulettes have been devouring each and every one of them. The bulettes also grow stronger with each meal—an unwanted side effect.

Longbranch asks the PCs to head into the clearing and stomp on at least 15 stinkgrubs, smushing them into the dirt so trees will begin to grow.

Quest XP: 350 XP for stomping on 15 stinkgrubs.

SPECIAL FEATURES

STINKGRUBS

These bugs will temporarily empower a bulette if eaten, and can be stomped on and destroyed by players:

- A player can occupy the same square as a stinkgrub, and must be on or adjacent to its square to stomp on one.
- A player can stomp on one stinkgrub as a minor action.
- A stinkgrub has no hit points or defenses; any attack or damage against it kills it.
- At the end of every round, three new stink grubs appear (one at each hole), and every stinkgrub will move 1 square toward the closest bulette.
- When a stinkgrub is stomped on by a player or eaten by a bulette, it immediately dies and disappears.
- When a stinkgrub is eaten by a bulette, the bulette gains a temporary bonus to attacks and damage (*see below*).

SWALLOWED WHOLE

The ravenous bulettes can use a rechargeable ability called *Swallowed Whole*, devouring nearby players and stinkgrubs:

- The bulette gains a +2 bonus to attack rolls and deals an additional **5 damage** with attacks each time a stinkgrub or player is swallowed. This effect stacks and lasts until the end of the bulette's next turn.
- Any number of stinkgrubs can be eaten at once, but only one player may be swallowed by (or be inside) a bulette at any time.

Being swallowed affects players during their turn:

- Take the player's mini off the table; the player is considered to occupy the same spot as the bulette.
- A swallowed player takes their turn as normal, but is immobilized while inside the bulette.
- A swallowed player takes **10 acid damage** at the start of their turn.
- A swallowed player can attack the bulette with a +10 bonus to the attack roll. If the player's attack roll (with this bonus) is higher than 30, the player managed to hit the quakestone lodged inside the bulette's throat.
- Hitting the quakestone deals an additional **2d10 damage** with the attack. If a quakestone is hit three times, it is destroyed, dealing **5d10 damage**.
- A swallowed player remains swallowed until they damage the bulette from inside, triggering *Regurgitation* and spitting the player out.

GETTING STARTED

Read this as the players enter the clearing:

The thick expanse of foliage suddenly breaks into an open clearing. Several large trees lay fallen on the grass among trampled vines and uneven earth—most of the plantlife has been destroyed, and an eerie silence replaces the expected hum and chatter of the forest's wildlife. As you survey the area, you feel a gentle tremor rumbling beneath your feet, slowing growing in power.

AREA: THE CLEARING

Read this when the bulettes approach:

The ground around you begins to shake violently; you hear a loud crack as nearby trees splinter and fall to the ground, knocking up dust and dirt from the forest floor. Between the fallen greenery and dead trees, a large mound of dirt appears, moving quickly in your direction. Suddenly, a monstrous form bursts from the ground, soaring overhead.

As it lands, it eagerly turns toward you, heaving as it eyes you and your allies with hungry eyes. The bulette opens its enormous jaws, baring several rows of large teeth as it lets loose a loud screech and begins stomping on the ground, nearly knocking you over. Within seconds, two other burrows appear, heading your way.

Perception (DC 14): Several fallen trees litter the area. Although dying, the trees look strong enough to support weight. The bark and vines should make for a quick climb.

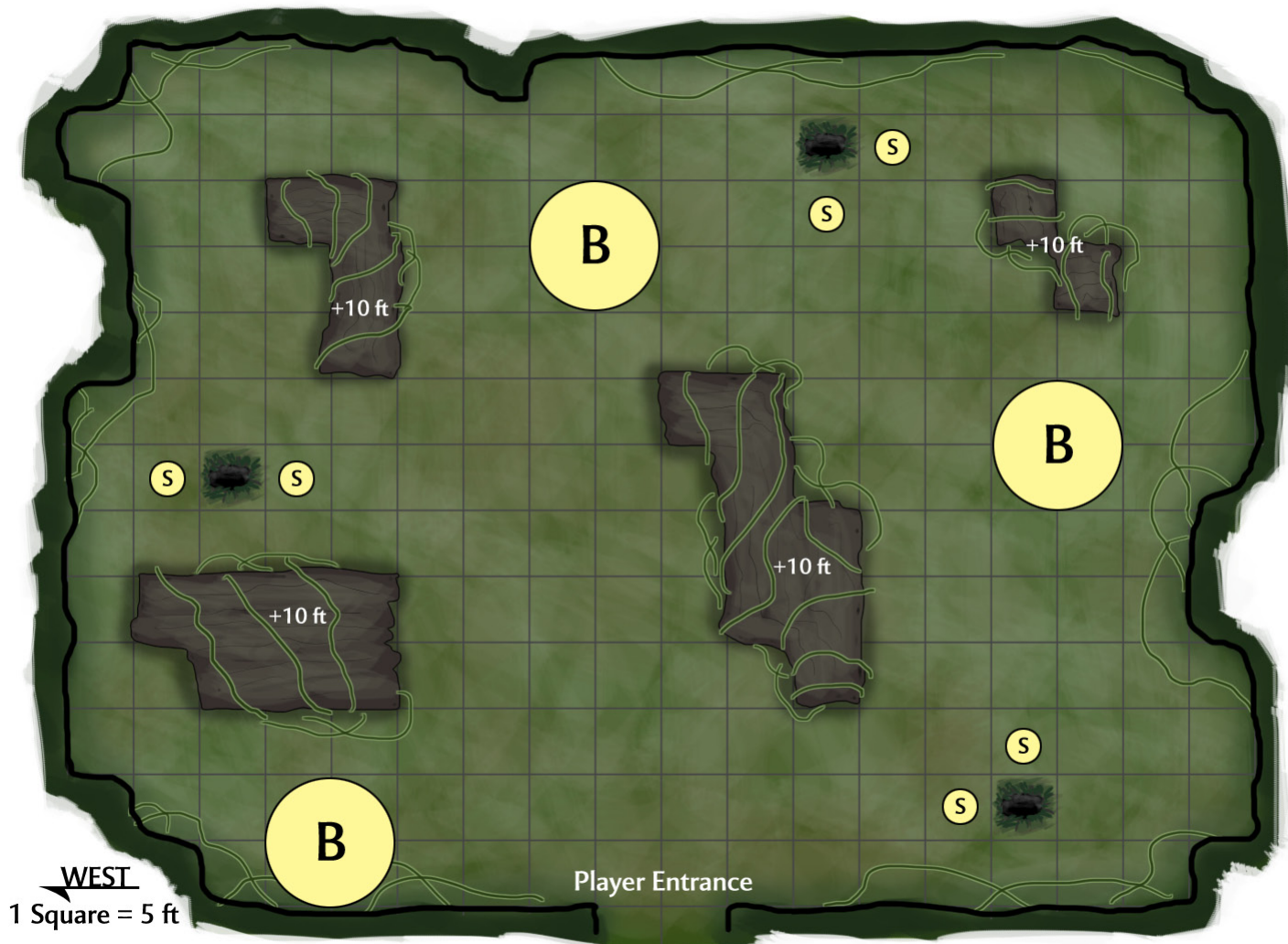
Nature (DC 16): You spot a few small holes scattered around the clearing. As the bulettes approach, you notice what appears to be small, orange larvae begin to climb out—the stinkgrubs.

SETUP

3 Ravenous Bulettes (B)

6 Stinkgrubs (S)

Start the encounter with one ravenous bulette visible, and the other two underground, visible when they surface.



FEATURES OF THE AREA

Height: There is no ceiling.

Illumination: The clearing is well-lit from the sun above.

Fallen Trees: Marked as brown squares with vines, these trees are 10' tall. A player can climb up the trees with a **DC 10 Athletics** check.

Vines: Any squares marked by vines (including those on top of trees) count as difficult terrain.

Stinkgrub Holes: Marked as small black holes. At the end of each round, one stinkgrub appears adjacent to each of these holes. See **Special Features** for more details.

RAVENOUS BULETTES IN COMBAT

The ravenous bulettes are starving and will always look for the easy meal, attacking the most vulnerable player at the time. If a player is all alone, a bulette might leave its current engagement to attack the straggler. While a bulette has a player in its mouth with *Swallowed Whole*, it is temporarily sated and will not use that ability, though you still roll to recharge it.

The bulette will use *Earth Furrow* to move around the clearing, passing under trees and attempting to knock players prone. Once it has a vulnerable target, the bulette will either close the distance with *Bite*, use *Shake the Earth* to bring the target closer, or use *Swallowed Whole* if within range. If the players try to hide on the trees, the bulettes can use *Bite* or *Shake the Earth* to knock them off.

The bulettes are hungry enough to sometimes use *Swallowed Whole* on nearby stinkgrubs, though it would prefer to use it when it can affect both stinkgrubs and a player.

COMBAT FLAVOR

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

When stinkgrubs appear, read:

More stinkgrubs appear from the holes as they crawl toward the nearest bulette, attracted to the tremors.

When a bulette uses *Bite*, read:

The bulette makes a sudden leap, baring its teeth as it lands and delivering a powerful bite.

When a bulette uses *Swallowed Whole*, read:

The bulette lurches forward and opens its gigantic jaws, swallowing everything nearby in one giant bite and gaining strength with each morsel consumed.

Ravenous Bulette	Level 10 Elite Skirmisher	
Large natural beast	XP 1,000	
HP 222; Bloodied 111	Initiative +9	
AC 28, Fortitude 27, Reflex 22, Will 21	Perception +6	
Speed 6, Burrow 6	Darkvision, Tremorsense	
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1		
TRAITS		
Ground Eruption	The squares into which a bulette surfaces and the squares it leaves when it burrows underground become difficult terrain.	
STANDARD ACTIONS		
Ⓣ Bite At-Will	<i>Effect:</i> Before it bites, the bulette can make a standing long jump (as a free action) without provoking opportunity attacks. <i>Attack:</i> +15 vs AC <i>Hit:</i> 2d8 + 12 damage, or 4d8 + 12 damage against a prone target.	
☠ Swallowed Whole Recharge [1][2][3]	<i>Attack:</i> Close blast 2; +17 vs Fortitude <i>Hit:</i> 3d6 + 10 damage and the targets are swallowed. <i>Effect:</i> For every stinkgrub or player swallowed, the bulette gains a +2 bonus to attack rolls and deals an additional 5 damage with each attack, lasting until the end of its next turn. See Special Features for details.	
MOVE ACTIONS		
Ⓣ Earth Furrow At-Will	<i>Effect:</i> The bulette moves up to its burrow speed just below the surface of the ground, avoiding opportunity attacks as it passes underneath other creatures' squares. As it burrows beneath the space of a medium or smaller creature on the ground, the bulette makes the following attack. <i>Attack:</i> +9 vs Fortitude <i>Hit:</i> The target is knocked prone.	
MINOR ACTIONS		
⬅ Shake the Earth Recharge [1][2]	<i>Attack:</i> Close burst 3; +15 vs Fortitude <i>Hit:</i> Each creature in the blast is pulled 2 squares and knocked prone.	
TRIGGERED ACTIONS		
Regurgitation Immediate Reaction	<i>Trigger:</i> A swallowed player damages the bulette from inside. <i>Effect:</i> The bulette spits the player out, pushing them 4 squares away from the front of the bulette and knocking them prone.	
Skills Athletics +17, Endurance +16		
Str 25 (+12)	Dex 14 (+7)	Wis 13 (+6)
Con 23 (+11)	Int 3 (+1)	Cha 9 (+4)
Alignment Unaligned	Languages –	

When a player begins their turn inside a bulette, read:

As you twist and turn inside the bulette's throat, dripping acid begins to seep through your armor. Near the back of the throat, you see a bright glowing stone—something tells you this might be the quakestone.

When a player attacks a bulette from inside, read:

You lash out with your weapon, attacking the monster from within. At this range, it's almost impossible to miss.

If a player damages the quakestone, read:

Your attack delivers a solid blow the quakestone, which begins to vibrate as pieces fall off. The resulting magic force looks to be doing serious damage to the bulette's insides.

When a quakestone is destroyed, read:

The quake stone shatters, erupting in a magical explosion inside the bulette's stomach.

When a player is spit out with *Regurgitation*, read:

The bulette roars in pain, convulsing as it spits you out and sends you hurling through the air.

When a bulette uses *Earth Furrow*, read:

The bulette dives into the earth, shaking the ground as it burrows below, knocking you down.

When a bulette uses *Shake the Earth*, read:

The bulette pounds the ground around it, making a small crater and knocking those nearby into it.

When a player stomps on a stinkgrub, read:

The stinkgrub turns to an orange mush beneath your feet.

CONCLUSION

The bulettes will fight until death, refusing to retreat. Once they've been killed, the players can destroy any remaining quakestones, but the acid will be dried up and the stinkgrubs have returned to their holes. Upon returning to the grove, the druids will give them a level 10 magic item. If the PCs managed to complete all of the minor quests, Nature's Grace will give them an additional level 11 magic item.

Aluma will thank the PCs for their help, saying:

"Keeping Tanglethorn Forest in balance is a delicate matter. The cycle of life and the food chain walk a thin line between starvation, overgrowth, or an unchecked population of animals. If it weren't for our intervention, this forest would have died long ago; the quakestones were a mistake, I know, but the intentions were good. Now onto other solutions, possibly a sonicstone—bats wouldn't be nearly as much trouble."

ADJUSTMENTS

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

We have too few or too many players:

For 4 players, subtract a bulette. For 6 players, add a bulette and increase the bulette's damage by 25%.

We aren't the right level:

*The ravenous bulettes are based off the bulette monster found in the **Monster Builder**. Adjust the attack bonuses and damage using the **Dungeon Master's Guide**.*

It's too easy:

If things aren't challenging enough for your players, consider the following adjustments:

- Increase the bulette's burst and blast ranges.
- Increase the number of stinkgrubs that spawn and the bonus the bulette receives from eating them.
- Decrease the damage taken when a bulette hits the quakestone, or decrease the attack bonus from being inside a bulette.
- Increase the acid damage per turn, to discourage players from constantly being swallowed.

It's too hard:

If the players are having a hard time, consider making the following adjustments during combat:

- Increase the amount of damage dealt from within a bulette.
- Increase the recharge on the bulette's abilities.
- Alternate *Earth Furrow* with a standard move action, or remove the jumping that accompanies the *Bite* attack.
- Let the players make a **DC 14 Athletics** or **Acrobatics** check to remain standing when they would be knocked prone.

I don't get the **Swallowed Whole** ability:

Being swallowed is just an interesting hook to surprise your players in combat. No, it doesn't make sense that a bulette can still do a bite attack while its mouth is full; or that a player in its mouth could see and attack a magical stone lodged in the creature's stomach. So what!

The most important thing is to make sure your players understand that they aren't 'out of the game' by being swallowed—in fact, they will often be even more useful with a strong attack. I fully expect some heroic fights to go diving into the maw of the monstrous creatures, once they realize how much damage can be inflicted.

We want to play a full adventure:

Tanglethorn Forest is an enormous place full of many encounters, stories, and extended adventures. Here are a couple brief examples of possible adventures:

Adventure 1:

Part of the forest is burning, but the fire doesn't seem to be spreading—just a seemingly impassable wall of flames. Inside the blaze is an insane elemental wizard, trying to summon an ancient volcano from the elemental chaos into this realm, so his master, a powerful fire elemental, can rule the area.

Adventure 2:

Some of the trees are growing at an astounding rate, and are nearly invincible. Further investigation reveals that the trees have been spliced with troll's blood and have come alive, working with several treants to remove all humanoid presence from the forest, purifying it.

