

Cruelclaw's Feast

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Experience had taught the infamous mercenary Cruelclaw that the two most rewarding kinds of contracts were those involving high risk and those involving important people. Naturally, the weasel also knew that taking on a high-risk contract from a very important person would offer him and the Diresshade Company the greatest reward of all. And, lo and behold, his intuition had proven correct yet again.

Cruelclaw lounged in a banquet hall of King Glarb, joined by a few of his most trusted officers. He'd pulled back the hood of his red coat, taking in the fancy hall with his one good eye. The weasel was more accustomed to taverns and burrows, but he had no problem indulging in the hospitality of royalty after a job well done.

Servants swarmed the hall and covered the table with a bounty of dishes. Cruelclaw watched his officers greedily eye the feast, and he couldn't blame them. His stomach had started rumbling the second he saw the first dish.

Cruelclaw raised his cup in a toast. "To another successful contract!" His officers raised their cups in kind. "King Glarb has graciously acknowledged our unrivaled skill and has rewarded us with this feast. He's told me we can eat to our fill, so loosen your belts and don't hold back!"

After a roar of approval, the entire group dug in.

Good food was rarely hard to come by in the Valley, but there was a stark difference between the dishes of a humble baker and those of a royal chef. Cruelclaw snatched food from a multitude of bowls and platters, unable to settle on just one delicacy. He drank heavily of cider between bites, having neither need nor desire to restrain himself.

Dish after dish was devasted by the ravenous mercenaries. Servants dutifully replaced finished dishes with new ones, so the feast seemingly felt endless. While the royal pantries were bottomless, the mercenaries were not. They bowed out one by one, cradling stuffed middles and groaning. But Cruelclaw's appetite refused to wane.

The weasel's flat middle had swollen like a pumpkin, packed with food and cider. His red coat clung desperately to his belly, the buttons precariously holding on for dear life. Every gulp caused the buttons to creak as the gaps between them widened a little more.

Cruelclaw wasn't a glutton; he hadn't become so skilled with a rapier by stuffing his face at every meal. But the weasel simply couldn't resist gorging at the king's expense. Free, fancy food proved to be an incredible motivator. And to his own surprise, he didn't feel completely full.

While impatiently waiting for servants to replace the dishes closest to him, Cruelclaw surveyed his officers. All but one had given up on the feast, and the final mercenary still glutting was of no surprise to him. Fletch was a rabbit as bulky as a badger and twice as fierce in a fight. The rabbit's gut had ballooned out from under his tunic, which never fit him well anyway.

A delightful idea came to Cruelclaw, prompted as much by his pride as his gluttony. "Fletch. Care for a friendly wager?"

Fletch finished swallowing. "What kind, Boss?" the rabbit belched out.

"Something I'm certain you'll enjoy. Why don't we see who can eat the most food?"

The bet raised the eyebrows of the other mercenaries. "Are you sure, Boss? I can't remember you ever out-eating me before."

"That's because I've never bothered trying," Cruelclaw smirked.

Fletch shrugged. "Sure, then. Uh, I haven't kept track of how much I've had, though."

"We'll just compare the size of our bellies afterward. That's as good a measure as any." Cruelclaw slapped the side of his gut, wobbling the taut ball in his lap.

Fletch nodded his approval, and the competition was on.

Seeing he had some catching up to do, Cruelclaw shoveled food into his maw at a tremendous pace. His middle steadily jiggled and swelled with every swallow. The buttons of his coat didn't stand a chance against the weasel's ravenous onslaught. The first button popped off and skidded across the table, leaving his gut bouncing in its wake. Another followed, and another. His white middle spilled free of his coat like a furry avalanche, relieving him of pressure. Popping his buttons only encouraged Cruelclaw to eat faster.

Cruelclaw attacked the feast with the same enthusiasm he brought to battle. Fork and knife darted out with incredible precision, delivering bite after bite to the greedy weasel's mouth. He thought nothing of the growing pressure in his ballooning middle, focusing exclusively on defeating Fletch, who ate almost as competitively as his boss.

The two opposing bellies swelled at opposite ends of the table, dramatic displays of who was eating more than who. While Fletch had begun with a decent advantage, he couldn't match Cruelclaw's speed or determination. The rabbit slowed as his stomach protested the excess of food and drink forced upon it. He leaned back for a quick breather, but his chair groaned ominously beneath him. A fearsome crack rang out throughout the banquet hall as Fletch's chair collapsed, causing the engorged rabbit to plummet to the floor. He landed on his ample rump and let loose a wall-rattling belch that startled

the servants, before falling flat on his back. His belly rose like a hill, firmly weighing him down.

Cruelclaw smiled as he finished off a cup of cider, but he didn't declare victory immediately. He wanted there to be no doubt who had won their eating contest, and that meant having a belly that clearly dwarfed Fletch's.

Against the odds, Cruelclaw continued gorging, finishing dishes faster than the servants could replace them. He ate until his belly filled his lap and pressed against the table, pushing him away from his plate. The weasel stopped eating only when he could no longer reach food, and he swore he could've handled a few more plates.

Panting from the legendary feast, Cruelclaw carefully hefted himself out of his chair. The weasel's boulder of a belly swung gently from left to right, heavier than the rest of him combined. He took one cautious step at a time as he approached his fallen foe.

"Your appetite was as formidable as always, Fletch, but I don't like to lose bets." Cruelclaw gripped the sides of his swollen belly and lifted it. With a toothy grin, he dropped his belly onto Fletch's. The rabbit yelped and burped, groaning from the immense weight on his taut middle. "I think it's fair to say I won, don't you all agree?" Cruelclaw asked his fellow mercenaries. They all quickly nodded in agreement, as did the astonished servants.

"Congrats—*urrrrrrp*—Boss," Fletch moaned. The rabbit's eyelids closed, and he fell into a well-earned food coma.

"To the Direshade Company!" Cruelclaw's bellow wobbled his gut. "May we always prove the winners, both in battle and banquet." The weasel rubbed his massive ball belly, ogling it like a precious trophy. He could get used to having a big appetite.