

## **Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove's Eating Contest**

By: Indigo Rho

It was the perfect day for a free meal.

Mr. Foxglove sat at the far end of a long table in the center of town, dressed more appropriately for a royal ball than an eating competition. To the fanciful fox, every occasion deserved extravagant attire. He'd chosen a white and purple striped doublet for the competition, accented by a belt of gilded metal leaves that wrapped around his lithe waist. A bundle of brilliant foxgloves jutted from his purple wide-brimmed hat in place of feathers. Not a single strand of fur on his fluffy orange tail was out of place.

Roguish schemes were Mr. Foxglove's forte, and the handsome fox had no trouble at all charming his way into complimentary gifts, especially meals. Sadly, entering an eating competition didn't require much in the way of charm, but the promised bounty more than made up for that. Even a fox as magnificent as he needed to relax now and then.

A mouse wide enough to be mistaken for a competitor himself stood before the table, which was filled with delectable pies. "Welcome once again to the annual eating competition!" he declared to loud cheers from the assembled townsfolk. "Many competitors, both old and new, have gathered today to test their appetites against each other! Among them is our reigning champion, Cruelclaw!"

At the opposite end of the table from Mr. Foxglove sat a lean weasel with a grin as wicked as the scars across his right eye. He wore a red coat and a cape torn and scarred from his work as a mercenary. The year before, Cruelclaw had participated in the eating competition on a bet while passing through town. To his pleasant surprise, none had proven capable of matching his fierce appetite that day. He cared far more about his ability to fight than his ability to eat, but the desire to defend his title had brought him back to town. Besides, the pies *were* delicious.

The mouse continued his speech. "Per tradition, whoever eats the most is the winner. Without further ado, Let the eating commence!"

Gnashing jaws attacked the mountain of pies as the majority of the competitors shoveled food into their mouths with reckless abandon. Meanwhile, Mr. Foxglove retained his impeccable manners as he ate the pies slice by slice. The goal was to eat the most, not the fastest, after all, and Mr. Foxglove refused to sully his clothes or fur getting the pie into his mouth a few seconds quicker. The fox took large bites, for sure, but he savored each and every one.

While Cruelclaw didn't eat as messily as those beside him, he did attack the pies as fiercely as he would any foe, snapping up slice after slice. Victory would once again be a breeze, and the weasel would waddle off stuffed full of pie.

Competitors steadily dropped out as their stomachs succumbed to the abundance of desserts. Some left disappointed and groaning, while others left satisfied and moaning, pleased to have indulged even if they didn't win. Before long, only Mr. Foxglove and Cruelclaw remained, and neither showed any sign of slowing down.

Mr. Foxglove's flat middle had puffed out and gained a noticeable curve. His belt dug deeper and deeper into his bloated belly with every bite. He winced from the slight pressure and slid a paw down to undo the clasp. The belt came undone with a flick of his claw and a wobble of his gut. Two pies later, the fox found it necessary to unbutton his doublet as well, lest he tear a seam. His middle, a modest ball of white flanked by orange, gently swelled free of his doublet and across his lap, where it continued to spread as he continued to eat.

Winning wasn't Mr. Foxglove's priority. He merely intended to have his fill of the wonderful pies the town was best known for, and perhaps catch the eye of a fan who appreciated hearty appetites and might offer him a bed for the night free of charge. No reason one scheme couldn't lead right into another.

At the end of the table, Cruelclaw hastily unbuttoned his coat before his bulging belly had a chance to burst through it. The taut white orb wobbled free, nowhere near sated. He glanced at his last remaining competitor between pies, some gaudy fox he'd never seen before. Whoever he was, he had an incredible appetite. But so did Cruelclaw, and the weasel never gave up, either in battle or at the table.

As the pies before Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove dwindled, servers rushed to divide the uneaten ones from the losers between them. Dishes emptied one by one as bellies ballooned, but neither weasel nor fox slowed down. The competition only ended when the pies ran out.

The mouse overseeing the competition surveyed the scene in awe. "This...this has never happened before. I suppose we'll have to count the plates to determine the winner, then."

Servers swiftly counted the plates stacked before Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove. Then they counted them a second time, and a third time. As unlikely as it seemed, the pair had finished off exactly the same number of pies.

Cruelclaw hefted himself out of his chair, careful not to flip the table over with his swollen middle, which hung past his knees. The weasel could hardly

believe how much pie he'd eaten—or how he barely felt full after the feast. Perhaps he was getting *too* good at gorging.

After taking a moment to stifle a burp, Mr. Foxglove placed a paw on the table to brace himself as he stood. His belly had the delightful wobble that accompanied any proper feast. He watched the crowd, ever on the lookout for someone unable to hide their keen interest in him. Three candidates stood out, to his satisfaction.

"Gentlemen, you have both truly surprised and impressed us today," the mouse told Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove. "For the first time ever, we have a tie."

Excited chattering spread through the crowd.

"Then how do we figure out who won?" Cruelclaw asked. Sharing the glory didn't appeal to him.

"Um. Well, I suppose we could hold a second round of the competition between just the two of you. We'll have to postpone it till tomorrow to bake more pies—and of course, there'll be even more than there were today to ensure there's no doubt of who the winner is."

Gorging two days in a row was a bit excessive to Cruelclaw, but the weasel needed a definitive win, and the pies were as tasty as they were filling. "I'm fine with a second round," he said.

"As am I," Mr. Foxglove answered. The unexpected second chance to feast was as sure a sign of the fox's good luck as he could hope for. Win or lose, he'd eat to his heart's content.

"Excellent!" the mouse squeaked, and turned to the curious audience. "Our incredible competitors will face each other tomorrow once more in a finale for the ages! Be sure to join us so you don't miss history!"

A roar of excitement rose from the crowd. Bakers rushed to begin preparations for the next day's feast, rattling off lists of ingredients to overwhelmed assistants. Cruelclaw waddled back to the inn, hoping the mountain of pies he'd consumed would satisfy him for the rest of the night. Mr. Foxglove strolled into the audience, casually placing himself in the path of a rabbit who couldn't quite hide his blatant adoration of rounder middles. Chubby chasers were always so easy to spot.

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Cruelclaw wasn't surprised that he woke the next day with a rounder face and a plump ball gut, just mildly frustrated. Slimming down took effort and time, both of which the weasel needed for other, more important endeavors. Gaining weight wouldn't deter him from winning the pie-eating competition, though.

An evening of having his swollen middle doted on had left Mr. Foxglove in an exceptionally chipper mood. He swore his new rabbit companion had rubbed every inch of his belly a hundred times over without losing enthusiasm. And of course, the compliments about his new pudgy figure had been endless.

Dozens upon dozens of fresh pies covered the table in the center of town, far more than the day before. Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove were seated beside each other. People packed the square as word of the pair's gluttonous prowess had swiftly spread.

The second round of the competition began not unlike the first. Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove ate at a modest pace, steadily clearing plates as they dug into the bounty of pies. They matched each other bite for bite, slice for slice, and pie for pie, neither managing to take a commanding lead over the other.

Bellies ballooned as dishes were pushed aside. Buckles and buttons were deftly undone, allowing the opposing spheres of furry white to swell forth to cheers from the audience. Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove's expanding middles were as popular as they were, potent displays of their relentless gluttony and decent indicators of how was—or wasn't—in the lead.

With half the pies wiped out, Cruelclaw noticed he appeared neck and neck with Mr. Foxglove. Unwilling to risk falling behind, the weasel took bigger bites, finishing off pies faster than ever. His belly bobbed and wobbled as it filled, forcing him to push down on the taut ball with a paw so it didn't get in the way of his eating. Worrying about how much more weight he'd gain overnight could wait for later.

The competitive spirit slowly took hold of Mr. Foxglove. The fox had basked in praise the day before, and he craved it more and more. If gorging would earn him the attention and adoration of the townsfolk—and all the perks that came with it—then he'd show them how bottomless his stomach truly was. He packed away the pies with newfound zeal and a dream of celebrity.

Servers raced to replace empty plates with fresh pies, working tirelessly to keep up with the competing gluttons. They were slowed equally by exhaustion and the distracting swell of Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove's bellies.

Cruelclaw was the first to have to scoot his chair back to make more room for his massive gut, though Mr. Foxglove followed shortly. The two grunted and groaned as they reached for pies that steadily felt further away, battling their bellies as much as each other.

"You might as well drop out already," Cruelclaw sneered between bites. "I'll eat all day if need be, until my belly fills the entire square." A bluff for sure, but gorging alone wasn't working. Intimidation would be required if he wanted

to defeat Mr. Foxglove, something he saw no shame in. A good fighter used every tool at their disposal.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly give up,” Mr. Foxglove replied, amused by Cruelclaw’s shift in tactics. “So many folk put their heart and soul into baking these pies, and letting them go to waste would be terribly rude. But do not fret—I’ll happily eat whatever you can’t stomach.”

The subtle taunt provoked a short snarl from Cruelclaw, but the weasel soon found himself grinning as he continued eating. His opponent greatly irritated him, but at least he was a worthy foe rather than an amateur with an absurd appetite. That’d make his victory all the sweeter.

Little spikes of pressure needled the taut bellies of the fox and weasel as they glugged well beyond their normal limits. Neither could deny how horribly stuffed they felt, how the simple act of swallowing had turned into a challenge in itself. Yet not once did the thought of giving up cross their minds. Both believed they could eat more than the other and wouldn’t let their protesting stomachs convince them otherwise.

Engorged to the extreme, Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove ate slower and slower and slower. Their bellies blimped outward in every direction, inevitably brushing together as they ran out of space. Pitiful creaks echoed from the chairs struggling to hold their bulk. Servers handed the competitors plates once they could no longer reach the table. All Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove saw were the massive curves of their bellies and the pies perched atop them.

The two steadfast competitors reached for their final slices of pie and gulped them down in unison. Twin groans emitted from their chairs, which collapsed, sending the gluttons plummeting to the ground. Their mountainous bellies bounced and smacked against each other like furry tidal waves.

Gasps filled the square as the crowd surrounded the fallen competitors.

“How badly did I—*uworrriirrp*—beat him?” Cruelclaw moaned. He fought off sleep as he waited for an answer.

“*Buworrriirrp!*” Mr. Foxglove chuckled weakly as he watched the surface of his gut vibrate from the force of his belch. He suspected he’d gone a bit overboard. “Don’t count me out just yet.”

Relieved to see the weasel and fox were apparently unharmed by their fall, the servers dutifully went about counting the empty plates. Nervous words passed between them after the count, leading to a second count. The servers regrouped, and a raccoon among them was pushed toward the mouse who’d officiated the competition. He whispered something in the round mouse’s ear.

“What are the odds?” the mouse muttered in disbelief. “Somehow, someway, our two competitors have once again managed to eat exactly the same number of pies!”

“What?!” Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove belched out simultaneously.

“We had an odd number of pies baked in case the impossible happened—I apologize for underestimating both of your appetites, by the way—but it seems a single pie accidentally fell off the table at some point. So we have a tie!” the mouse said. “I suppose we can arrange for a third round tomorrow if need be.”

“No!” Again the weasel and fox shouted together, surprising each other.

“This is just fate telling us to share the title,” Cruelclaw said. His bloated boulder of a belly had crushed all the competitive cravings out of him. He was already going to wake up incredibly fat—he didn’t want to further balloon in size for a title he’d never intended to secure in the first place.

“I couldn’t possibly force the wonderful bakers to spend yet another tireless night and day toiling for our benefit. It’d be an honor to share the victory,” Mr. Foxglove said. The engorged fox desperately needed a break from pie, as delicious as it was. He feared he might eat until he exploded if a third round were held. A tie for first would earn him plenty of complimentary treats from awe-inspired fans.

The mouse clasped his paws together and breathed a subtle sigh of relief. “We are blessed with such humble victors! I officially declare Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove our joint winners this year! I can only imagine the appetites they’ll bring to the competition next year!”

The fearful groans that came from Cruelclaw and Mr. Foxglove were drowned out by the cheers of the crowd. But while neither cared to dwell on future gluttony, they privately accepted the fact they’d be back to defend their titles. The only question was how much heavier they’d both be when the time came.