

## **Cruelclaw's Voracious Brawl**

By: Indigo Rho

An empty stomach never did a person any good. That wasn't Cruelclaw's motto, but the weasel thought of the old adage whenever his stomach rumbled at him. The dockside tavern he'd chosen for lunch was relatively quiet. Most folks sat alone, scarfing down food and drink before they scurried back to work. The tavern keeper was the widest rat Cruelclaw had seen in years, a doughy fellow who seemed to narrowly avoid getting wedged in the kitchen door when he went in and out to grab food. A fat tavern keeper was as good a sign as a fat cook. Another thing the mercenary had learned over time.

Two meat pies were placed on the table with a *thunk, thunk*. Cruelclaw thanked the tavern keeper as he waddled off, then set his sights on his prize. He pulled back the hood of his red coat and licked his lips. Meat cravings had plagued his thoughts all day long, and the appetizing dishes before him promised to sate his frequently bottomless appetite. The meal might be a bit much, but he deserved to indulge now and then.

Shadows abruptly poured over the table. Cruelclaw glanced up from his food and sighed, already certain his visitors would displease him.

A rat, a rabbit, and an otter surrounded the table. They wore their swords proudly at their sides, making no effort to hide them. Smug grins were plastered across their muzzles. Nuisances, without a doubt.

"So *this* is the infamous Cruelclaw?" the otter asked with a dismissive scoff. He was the tallest of the trio and rather thick, with faint signs of muscle alongside his bulk.

"Can't be that many weasels around here dressed in red with a torn-up eye," the rabbit said. He wore a small necklace of faded fangs. Cruelclaw suspected they'd been plundered from a discarded fish skull rather than defeated foes.

"Not much of a looker, is he?" the rat snickered. He was the shortest of the group by far, shrouded in a blue cloak and wrappings.

None of the interlopers impressed Cruelclaw at first glance. Fools looking to make a name for themselves, like countless others who'd tried and failed before them. He'd give them a chance to rethink their stupidity, like he always did, but hunger had worn his patience thin.

"I'm about to eat, so why don't you all run along while you're still able?" Cruelclaw growled.

"He's making threats as empty as his belly," the rabbit snorted.  
"Whatever shall we do?"

The otter smacked the table with his thick tail, knocking it over and splattering the meat pies across the floor. Patrons swiftly fled the tavern, and the keeper retreated into the kitchen. "There, now you don't have to worry about your food. Shame you missed out on a nice last meal. Putting an end to you will make us known throughout the Valley."

The trio drew their weapons.

Gloryseekers were the worst. "Oh, you'll be known throughout the Valley, alright, Cruelclaw said as he unsheathed his rapier. "As three more forgettable idiots felled by my blade."

The otter lunged, aiming to cleave Cruelclaw in half in a single strike. Cruelclaw simply stepped to the side and drove his knee hard into the otter's middle. An elbow to the head and a stiff kick sent the otter hard into the floor.

The rat and rabbit hesitated.

"Lost your confidence already?" Cruelclaw sneered. He wondered if the trio had ever fought anyone more competent than bandits or common pickpockets. A few little wins, and they thought they could take on the world. Typical.

The rabbit huffed and stepped forward. "You got lucky. It won't happen again!" He swung his sword more accurately than the otter had, actually forcing Cruelclaw to parry and dodge.

The pair clashed back and forth, slowly moving away from the fallen table and towards the bar. The rat cautiously followed, unable to join without getting in the way. Every swing made the rabbit more confident, and a smile spread across his muzzle as he seemingly kept Cruelclaw on the defensive. "You can't avoid my sword forever, Cruelclaw. One hit's all it'll take to finish you!"

Cruelclaw bumped against the bar, and the rabbit darted forward to skewer his foe. But the weasel ducked in a flash, and the rabbit's sword drove deep into the bar. "Are you always this easy to manipulate?" Cruelclaw asked as he grappled the rabbit and tossed him over the side of the bar. "Or did I just catch you on a bad day?"

The rabbit slammed head-first into the ground. A dazed groan was his only reply to Cruelclaw's remark.

Hasty steps alerted Cruelclaw to the sneak attack just in time. He jumped away as the rat sliced another notch in his flowing cape, missing his hide by a hair. Rather than gloat, the rat simply swung again and again in a bid to overwhelm his opponent. Such tactics normally wouldn't have worked against Cruelclaw, but overexertion and hunger were getting to the weasel. Regaining control of the duel took time and patience, which he thankfully had plenty of when it came to a fight.

Little by little, Cruelclaw applied pressure to the rat, until his foe could barely keep up with him. With a flick of his wrist, he disarmed the rat, sending his sword clattering across the floor.

Cruelclaw shoved the rat against the wall, towering over him. "All that yapping, and this is the best you lot can do? You ruined a perfectly good meal for this?" he hissed. His stomach rumbled furiously, demanding food. Fighting had only made him hungrier, and hunger made Cruelclaw angry.

"W-we didn't mean anything by it! We'll get you more food, I promise, just let us go!" the rat squeaked in terror.

A wicked grin etched across Cruelclaw's face. "I know exactly how you can repay me and fill me up at the same time, but I don't think you're going to like it."

Cruelclaw opened his maw big and wide, giving the rat a clear look down his gullet. He clamped his jaws around the rat's muzzle and ravenously swallowed, pulling his foe-turned-meal's whole head into his mouth. Shocked, the rat didn't squirm until a couple of gulps later, and by then, his shoulders were sliding into Cruelclaw's maw, and his options for escape were dwindling fast.

Eating people was far from Cruelclaw's preferred method of defeating enemies. The act left him lethargic and soft around the middle, which required time to deal with. But nothing quelled his hunger like a live meal, and the humiliation his prey endured was beyond compare. Besides, the rat had made the mistake of looking bite-sized during lunch.

Cruelclaw grabbed the rat and lifted him off the ground. The rat's frantic kicks only drove him deeper into Cruelclaw's throat, and gravity didn't do him any favors, either. Cruelclaw's neck bulged as he swallowed, gradually popping the buttons of his coat as the twisting rat descended into his stomach. His fuzzy white belly ballooned out, bobbing up and down from the rat's futile struggles. With a few more greedy gulps, Cruelclaw sealed the rat away for good.

"That really hit the spot," Cruelclaw snickered. The weasel patted his bulging gut, practically giddy at how it wobbled and swayed. "Not quite as tasty as a meat pie, but far more filling."

"L-let him out!" The rabbit had stumbled out from behind the bar, sword in paw.

Cruelclaw grinned. "I'm not in the habit of throwing up a good meal. But I've plenty of room for seconds if you think you've already lived a long and fulfilling life." He raised his rapier, begging the rabbit to foolishly fight on.

"I'll just have to cut him out, then! It's not like you'll be able to take me on while you're stuffed!" The rabbit charged into battle, fierce and determined.

Clearly, the brash rabbit hadn't heard all the stories spread about Cruelclaw's appetite. Or maybe he'd brushed them off as fanciful tall tales. Cruelclaw expertly deflected the first blow, along with the second and third. Happy to show off, Cruelclaw leaped from side to side, balancing the wobble of his belly and striking back with relative ease. The rat didn't weigh him down nearly as much as past meals had.

"What was that about not being able to take you on while stuffed?" Cruelclaw taunted as he casually deflected another blow. "At this rate, I'll completely churn this morsel by the time you get in your first hit." The weasel slapped his gut, causing it to rock from side to side.

The rabbit snarled and swung wildly as Cruelclaw had hoped. Cruelclaw stepped to the left, then swung his swollen belly at the rabbit like a boulder. The impact knocked the wind right out of the rabbit and hurled him through a table, cracking it in half.

Cruelclaw waddled up to his fallen foe, tapping his wonderfully round middle with a paw. "Fighting makes me hungry, you know, even when it's against amateurs like you." He crouched and grabbed the rabbit by the shirt, dragging the dazed fool to his feet. "But hey, there's worse places to end up than in my belly. At least you didn't end up tumbling down the gullet of a calamity beast."

The rabbit twitched in response, barely conscious.

Still under the sway of his demanding stomach, Cruelclaw scarfed the rabbit down without hesitation. It didn't matter that a full-grown rat sat in his belly, he *needed* more, and the rabbit was the perfect second course. The rat's struggles picked up as his buddy steadily joined him in the cramped prison of the weasel's stomach. Pushing and shoving and kicking weren't enough to stop Cruelclaw from swallowing his prey. His wobbling gut bulged further with every gulp until his jaws shut tight around the wiggling paws of the rabbit.

Cruelclaw's legs quaked from the considerable weight around his waist. Despite the weasel's best efforts, he couldn't stay on his feet. His knees buckled, sending him to the ground with a thump and a bounce and leaving him leaning against his rowdy gut. "Been a—*uworrrip*—while since I gluttoned on two in one sitting. Guess it's a good thing I've never regretted it." He rubbed his belly with both paws.

"Never say never." The otter stepped into view, a bruise already forming on the tip of his snout. "You're good, I'll give you that, but don't you think it's dangerous to beach yourself in the middle of a fight you haven't won yet?"

Cruelclaw hadn't expected the otter to recover so swiftly. He hid his slight concern behind a grin. He'd gotten out of more harrowing situations before.

“Well, I rattled your brain like a pile of acorns in a squirrel’s hoard and turned two of you into a very satisfying lunch. I’d call that a win.”

“A fight’s not over until there’s only one person left standing, and unlike you, I’m still on my feet,” the otter said. He tried to smile, but the act made him wince, and he reverted to a neutral, less painful expression.

“That just means you’ve got one last chance to turn around and leave in one piece. Your buddies are mine now.” Cruelclaw patted his belly. “Anything that passes these jaws doesn’t come back out, idiots included.”

The otter shook his head. “I think you misunderstood my relationship with them. I don’t particularly care if they churn. In fact, they’ve done me a great favor by immobilizing you.” He knelt over Cruelclaw, digging his elbows hard into the weasel’s squirming belly. “Thanks to them, I’m about to become the otter who ate the infamous Cruelclaw.” He licked his lips menacingly.

Cruelclaw couldn’t believe his good fortune. If the otter had simply started swallowing him from behind, he might actually have been in trouble. “There’s one tiny problem with that. I’m still hungry for dessert.”

Cruelclaw grabbed the otter by the collar and pulled him onto his gut. The otter squeaked in surprise as he lost balance, then gasped in horror as he found himself sliding into Cruelclaw’s jaws.

Foolish food was the best food. Cruelclaw swallowed the panicking otter inch by inch, savoring the plush sides and middle of his overconfident meal. The otter was easily as big as both his former companions combined, but size didn’t matter to Cruelclaw. No one was too large for Cruelclaw to swallow, whether mouse or fox or badger. He knew he could even consume the doughy tavern keeper if he ever found the need to. Simply put, Cruelclaw couldn’t be beat.

The defeated otter steadily slid down the swelling curve of Cruelclaw’s belly and into the weasel’s throat. He collided with the rabbit and rat, who’d overheard his final conversation and weren’t the least bit happy about it. Their feud ensured none of them would band together to escape their fate, not that they’d had much of a chance either way.

Cruelclaw slurped the otter’s thick tail like an enormous noodle, ending his three-course feast with a satisfied sigh. His enormous gut jutted out before him, round and wobbly. Three prey in one sitting was a first for him. It wasn’t the sort of thing he’d gloat about—though he had no doubt word would spread in due time—but he couldn’t avoid feeling pride in the accomplishment.

“They’ll start calling me Crueljaw at this rate.” The stuffed weasel burped. “Or Cruelbelly. I can already tell you three are going to make me fat. Maybe I won’t bother losing the weight this time. Amateurs might bother me less if my appearance matches my voracious appetite. That or they’ll think I’m

easy to beat and fill my belly just like you all did. Sounds like a win-win to me,” he cackled.

The three doomed prey shouted and cursed, as much at each other as at Cruelclaw.

“Tavern keeper!” Cruelclaw bellowed. The wide rat hurried out of the kitchen. “Get me another meat pie. I’m simply feeling ravenous today.”

The rat gulped and immediately went to work.

Cruelclaw watched him waddle off and scowled when his stomach grumbled at him. “Don’t be greedy,” he chastised the wobbling mound of his middle. “We can always feast again later.”