

THE BUGBEAR'S BREASTPLATE

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How often did she get the chance to signal the charge? To stand on top of the hill and, with one swing of her sword, send a wave of troops crashing over a helpless village ripe with conquest? A shiver ran up and down her spine as she gave the order.

“Attack!”

The skeletons obeyed her, bone clanking against armor as they trundled forward. Lights were already going on in the village below, and she heard the first shouts of alarm. It felt good to be here, to be in charge—even if it was of an army of mindless slaves, and even if they were really listening to what was under her cloak, not here. Gizz grinned, displaying her fangs.

Under normal circumstances, that would be her down there in the front lines, being driven ahead of the evil army of some overlord or other, being smacked around by the other, bigger bugbears. She was only four and half feet tall, after all, and her frame was, well—she preferred words like “lean” and “compact”, but she more often heard “dinky” or “shrimp.”

It wasn't fair. Wasn't she a perfectly good bugbear in every other respect? She had a flat nose, a powerful jaw, and lush, bushy sideburns. Her eyes were the color of gold—“it means she'll grow up to be greedy!” her proud mother had said—and she was every bit as nasty and violent as bugbears twice her size. But she was little, so she was bullied and pushed around at every opportunity. Well, no more.

She ambled down the hill, watching villagers fleeing for their lives into the countryside as the skeletons smashed doors and brandished their terrible rusty blades. This. She'd done this. She'd conquered a village on her own!

Well, okay, not *entirely* on her own. Gizz looked down at the breastplate which had given her the power to summon and control the skeletons. Overlapping plates of solid bone, each carved with intricate patterns and runes. A magic item. Possibly even a *cursed* item, if the fact she couldn't take it off was any indication, but if that was the case, it was a *good* curse. The ability to command a skeleton army was worth a pair of stinky boobs. And it wasn't like she bathed all that much anyway.

So it was *mostly* the breastplate that conquered the village. But *she* was the one who'd stolen it. So wasn't it all her in the end?

“Okay, skellies!” she called as she strode into the village. “Looks like we conquered this little burg! Raise me high! I think I'll take—*that* house!”

She pointed to a manor on the hill. The skeletons did as they were told, hoisting her onto their bony shoulders—it was really uncomfortable, but it was worth it—and escorting her there as an undead honor guard.

“Loot the place! Take everything you can find!” she ordered the skeletons. “Food, valuables, weapons—I want it all!”

Several of them peeled off to search the village. The rest carried her into the manor, up the steps, and straight into a luxurious audience chamber with a particularly large and comfortable looking throne.

“Must have been the lord's house,” Gizz said, plopping down in the throne. “Guess that means it's mine now!” Her heart was beating like a drum. She'd done it. She'd actually done it! She'd conquered a whole town, and it had been *easy*! She stretched out and sighed in ecstatic contentment.

It didn't take long for the skeletons to return, laden with loot. Every family's secret savings had been unerringly unearthed. Chests of gold, silver sets, bags of gems—and the food! There was more food than treasure. Sacks of potatoes and grain, salted meats, chickens and pigs, barrels of ale and bottles of wine. Her stomach gurgled at the sight.

I don't know where to start, she realized. She'd always been fighting with the other bugbears for any scraps she could get. Having such an embarrassment of delicacies to pick from was an entirely new

experience.

“Eeny, meeny, miney—you!” she decided, snatching up a chicken and wringing its neck. She unhinged her jaw and stuffed the chicken in her mouth, working it down with her powerful throat muscles until it slid into her belly. She burped up a few feathers. That had taken the edge off nicely.

She chomped down a raw potato next. Bugbears didn't like fancy food, which was lucky, because she was pretty sure the skeletons didn't know how to cook. She certainly didn't. She gulped another potato. Who needed to mash 'em? That's what your teeth were for.

“Bring that keg!” she ordered. “Your lord is thirsty!”

The skeletons obligingly hauled the keg and, at her direction, held it over her and turned the tap. Beer poured out of the spigot. She put her mouth under it and gulped the golden liquid down until she had to pull her head away and take a great shuddering gasp of air. The beer kept pouring, splashing on the flagstones. Gizz didn't care. There was so much here! It would probably take her a week to eat it all.

The notion that she might not be *able* to eat it all never even entered her mind. She'd never had more food than she could eat. The very idea was absurd!

And so she kept eating as her stitched-hide loincloth tightened around her waist and her belly stretched and bulged. In fact, the more she ate, the more ravenous she grew. Her body was used to a feast-or-famine pattern of consumption, and one that was perpetually stuck at famine, at that. Now that it was finally getting its chance at *feast*, it had no intention of letting it go to waste. Every instinct Gizz had raced through her blood and pounded in her head. *Eat! Eat! Eat!*

One of the skeletons staggered in with a wriggling sow clutched in its arms. Gizz spat out the half-empty wine bottle she was chugging from and beckoned for the creature to be brought to her. *Sooooo* much meat...had she ever had anything even *close* to this much all to herself before? She was practically choking on her own drool as she stood to meet it. She opened her jaws as wide as she could and took the pig headfirst, working the kicking animal down her throat inch by inch. When she reached the widest part of the animal, her mouth and neck were so tight that her breathing tubes were pressed shut, and somewhere behind the raw hunger was a mounting fear that she would get stuck and suffocate. It only drove her to go faster. Her vision started to darken. At last she made it over the hump, and the last half of the pig slid easily into her belly. Her lips closed on the curly tail and slurped it down with a loud pop.

She plopped heavily into the chair. Her legs, firm and muscular as they were, hadn't been prepared for her body weight to nearly double in a single swallow. Maybe she'd take things a little easier before tackling another pig.

She called for more wine, and a wheel of cheese. She winced as the skeleton set the massive wheel down on her belly. Her stomach was not happy about being squashed like that. The obvious solution was to eat as much cheese as she could as quickly as she could until the wheel didn't weigh so much any more, and this is what she did, taking bottle-draining gulps of wine between every few bites.

Now she was eating a string of sausages and...hmm? What happened to the cheese? Had she eaten that entire wheel already? Why did her stomach still feel so squashed, then? Maybe because now it was trapped under the huge, round, tan thing bulging out in front of her. She grabbed at it. Oh—wait—that was her stomach. She giggled. Maybe she was getting just a little bit drunk. She had had about four or five or maybe a dozen or three bottles of wine, and all that beer, and a couple of colorful bottles of who knew what, and even with all the food in her stomach, that was bound to do something to a girl.

She kept eating the sausages. She was getting tired of sausages. It felt like the string would never end! So she jammed bread and fruit and bits of candy in around the edges and plowed ahead. And all the time her brain kept up the same refrain. *Eat! Eat! Eat!*

The first thing she was aware of when she woke was something sharp and cold pressing into the

pit of her stomach.

“Well, well, well. Look at *you*.”

Stupid talking flies. She tried to brush it away, but her hands couldn't seem to find it. And then Gizz recognized the feeling. A sword. Someone was jabbing the tip of a sword into her stomach.

“Who—what?” Gizz said, forcing her eyes open and looking around. “Where are you?”

“I'm right here in front of you,” the voice said. “But I suppose you can't see me. I can *certainly* see you, though. I mean, I can't help it.”

“Where is everything?” Gizz wondered. She was still pretty fuzzy and more than a little sauced, but she was pretty sure that usually when you woke up and looked around the room, you saw a room. All she could see was—was—

“You *ate* it, from the looks of that gut,” the voice chortled. “I don't think I've ever seen such a bloated bugbear in my life—and believe me, I have seen some *pret-ty* bloated bugbears.”

Gizz prodded the vast hillock of tan flesh in front of her and was rewarded with a stabbing pain and a wave of nausea. By the Bugbear under the Bed, that was all *her!* She was *huge*. She was *full!* She was—she was—*too* full?

That couldn't be. That was *impossible!* You *couldn't* be too full. And yet, unbelievably, incredibly, she could swear that's just what she was. She didn't want to eat anymore. She...she wished she'd eaten *less*. Her brain almost boggled at the sheer anti-logic of it, but she had to admit it was true.

The voice inside her head was still chanting “Eat! Eat! Eat!” But now the voice sounded like it was half-asleep and it had its mouth full. At any rate, she wasn't interested in doing what it said anymore. She'd had plenty, and then some.

The sword tip traced a gentle circle around her belly. Gizz tried to brush it away, but her hands couldn't even come close to reaching it. Then she tried to back away, but she was so full and heavy it was impossible to move. It felt like she was trapped under a rockslide, except *she* was the rockslide. The sword stopped moving and pressed again, gentle as whisper, but just hard enough to hurt. Gizz let out an involuntary squeak of fear. It would not take much to puncture her, not when she was practically ready to burst on her own.

“Mind if I come around?” the voice asked. “I feel a little strange talking to a pair of legs and a big fat underbelly.”

Before Gizz could answer, the sword pressure vanished, and a moment later a head popped up over the curve of her stomach. The head belong to an elf girl. She had long ears, freckles, and honey-blond hair that hung down in a pair of braids. The end of one of them brushed against Gizz's belly, and she snorted.

“Hey, don't laugh at me! I pretty much have you at my mercy, you know,” the elf said. “I'm the one with the sword and, um, the ability to move around and bend at the waist? All you can do is lie there like a mattress.”

She grinned.

“I bet you're comfy like a mattress, too! All big and plump and stuffed full of stuffing. I just want to take a running jump and plop down on you.” The elf took a step back.

“Don't!” Gizz cried, horrified. She would explode for sure!

“Oh, fine, you big baby,” the elf said, stepping out from behind Gizz's belly. She was slim, and wore cloth breaches, tough ironwood boots, and a maple breastplate that was intricately carved and polished to a lustrous coppery sheen. “I wasn't really *going* to. Hey, what's this?”

She reached down and picked up a chunk of wood. Gizz recognized it at once. No wonder the floor she was lying on was so uncomfortable!

“Is this...part of a chair?” the elf said. “You *actually* ate so much you broke the chair you were sitting in? Wow. Now *that's* impressive. Seriously. I once knew a dwarf who busted out of her belt, and I myself have been known to put a crack or two in the old girdle when the deep-fried lembas hit the fan, but I've never actually seen someone break a chair for real before. You, madam, have my respect.” She

stuck out her hand. “Zelly Pointears. Nice to meet you.”

Gizz didn't take it. *Elves!* They were a bunch of sickening goody-goodies. They were the enemy! She'd be burst a hundred times before she'd shake this one's hand. She bared her teeth and hissed.

“Huh, what's that? You hungry?” Zelly asked. She picked a fat sausage off the floor and dangled it in front of Gizz's nose. The bugbear gulped.

“N-no,” she managed as a wave of queasiness sloshed from one end of her to the other.

“No, I guess you wouldn't be,” Zelly said. “Y'know, you didn't really think this one out too well. Those skeletons seem to be cued to the state of their controller. I'm sure they were all really impressive when you were sacking the town and full of blood lust, but now that you're full of beer and ham, they're just kind of lolling around. I didn't even have to fight my way through. I just walked past them. And it wasn't exactly hard to find you, in the big room in the big house where all the food and treasure in town is piled.”

“Are—are you going to kill me?” Gizz asked, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

Zelly swung her sword in a blinding arc, spun it in one hand, and planted it in the floorboards. “Nah,” she said, grinning. “I'll leave avenging the town up to someone else. Me, I'm just here to recover a certain item and collect the reward.”

She tapped Gizz's bone breastplate with one slim finger. “This thing, to be exact. Minerva the Malignant is not happy that someone stole her Breastplate of Command Undead. Guess she'll be even less happy when she learns she has exactly the same bust size as a sawed-off bugbear. Mind if I tell her you were a busty succubus instead?”

“Can't take it off,” Gizz belched. “Cursed.”

“Oh, right.” Zelly scratched her head. “That's a real pickle. I forgot that anyone but Minerva who puts it on can't take it off again. Kind of counterproductive, really, but that's her problem, I guess.”

She plopped down in one of the courtier's chairs against the wall, crossed one leg over the other, and adopted a thoughtful expression.

“Well,” she said after a minute, “the way I see it, I've got three options. One is to roll you back to Minerva myself and let her deal with it. But that's an awful lot of work, and who knows whether I could even get you through the door. Second option is to kill you and hope the breastplate comes off afterwards. But if it doesn't, then I've got the same problem, except by the time I get you back you'll probably be stinking up a storm, too. Not exactly a fun time. So that brings us to Option 3.”

“And that is?” Gizz asked.

Zelly raised her eyebrow and pointed up with one finger. “Ah! I think you'll like this one. At least I think you'll like it better than the others. Option 3 is, we fatten you out of it.”

“*What* me out of it?” Gizz blinked.

“It can't be taken off the regular way, but it's not adjustable,” Zelly explained. “If it's a bad enough fit, eventually it'll just pop right off. I think. It's worth a try, at any rate. There's lots of food here, and I don't think those villagers are coming back anytime soon. All we've got to do is hole up here, stuff it down your throat, and keep stuffing until you're fat enough to bust out of that thing. Then presto! I take it back to Minerva, and you waddle off free as a slow, flightless bird. Sounds good, huh?”

“What makes you think I'll agree to that?” Gizz said, a slight snarl creeping into her voice. It was less because she had any real objection to gorging herself into a blubbery stupor—actually, the thought was kind of intriguing—and more that she really didn't want to do anything just because a stupid elf said so. Plus the thought of being actually being fed by this elf, like she was a pet or something...it was mortifying. Her pride would never allow it!

“Well, call it a hunch, but something tells me you're not the sort of girl who's overly worried about keeping herself slim and trim,” Zelly said. “Plus, I'm a good cook. Better than skeletons, anyway. And I give *great* tummy massages.”

Still, Gizz could never agree to this. Could she? Maybe she wouldn't be fed like a pet. Maybe instead she'd be fed like a—a master! An overlord! Yes—this stupid elf would be her servant, her slave, forced to wait on her hand and foot and bring her every last thing her monstrous little heart desired. It was perfect! And the best part was, the sap had no idea she was playing right into Gizz's hands. She was snapping the chains around her own wrists of her own free will.

“All right,” Gizz said. “Option 3 it is.” She stifled a snicker. *Sucker!*

“Great!” Zelly said. “I'll get started cooking. You take a nice long nap and get that appetite back, you hear?”

The next month was the most glorious experience of Gizz's life. She ate almost constantly. When she was too full to eat, she was passed out in the village headman's large and luxurious bed. And on those rare occasions when she was both completely stuffed and not drooping into unconsciousness, she was massaged and pampered within an inch of her life by Zelly. It was phenomenal.

The weight absolutely piled on. It was like she was exploding in slow motion. She could almost see herself getting fatter day by day. That's what happens when you go from barely enough of anything to way too much of everything, and Gizz minded not at all. Her stomach bulged from a lean four-pack into a thick inner tube of fat, her muscular thighs swelled like loaves of bread baking in the oven, and her face filled out as she crammed it with rich meats and pastries.

The only irritation of it all was the breastplate, which stubbornly refused to burst from her body no matter how fat she got. At first she hadn't minded much—anything that meant the elf would keep the food coming was fine by her. But as the days passed and she swelled inch by inch, the breastplate grew ever tighter. A few weeks on and it was almost too tight for her to breath. The leather straps cruelly chafed the tender, newly-grown rolls oozing over them. She felt like a lump of dough that someone had grabbed onto and squееееееееzed.

“That thing's still holding on, huh?” Zelly said, frowning. She thumped the bony plates. They creaked with the effort of supporting Gizz's blubbery chest, but stayed clamped firmly together.

Gizz groaned. “I'm...being...squashed!”

“We need to wrap this up,” Zelly pointed out, putting a hand on her belt. “I think I've gained ten pounds from being around all this food. My breeches are about to get breached.”

“What...do you...suggest?” the bugbear girl wheezed.

“Those straps look like they're ready to go at any moment. I'm going to feed you the rest of the town's food supply, all in one sitting. Either those things burst...or you do.”

Gizz gulped, but she couldn't say no. Her bugbear nature refused to let her turn down free food. And so Zelly began to cook.

She cooked pastries, pies and bread, she roasted vegetables, she broiled chickens, she put more than one farm animal down Gizz's gullet whole with nothing more than a basting of lemon juice, she cooked and cooked and she cooked, and Gizz ate, and ate, and ate. For a solid twenty-four hours they were locked into a culinary death march, until Zelly was flour-caked and exhausted and Gizz was nearly spherical and packed to the very verge of bursting.

“No...more...” she managed, waving Zelly away with one flabby arm.

“Can't...can't...eat...another bite.”

“But we're *so close!*” Zelly said.

“You... said that...twenty courses...ago.”

“So just think how much *closer* we are now!” Zelly help up a deep-fried dumpling. “Come on, just one?”

“N—” Gizz was cut off by Zelly popping the dumpling into the O of her mouth and gently pushing it inside. Gizz swallowed involuntarily. Even with her stomach stretched painfully tight, she

couldn't fight her instincts.

“No—” she tried again, but Zelly slipped another dumpling into her mouth. She had a whole basket of the damn things, Gizz noticed. *Just one, my big fat furry butt!*

“Stop—” she tried again. *Pop!* Another dumpling. Zelly shifted position, resting the basket on her knee. It looked heavy.

“I can't—” *Pop!*

“I don't have—” *Pop!*

“I'm going to—” *Pop!*

“We're nearly there,” Zelly promised. “This thing is going to go any second now.”

And so am I, Gizz thought desperately, wanting to kick and scream her frustration. Kicking was absolutely out of the question—she couldn't even feel her legs anymore—but if this elf needed anything, it was a good, loud, angry scream right in her face. Red-faced, she inhaled, though she felt as though the breastplate was going to cut her in two, and—

SPROING! The overtaxed leather straps finally snapped, letting Gizz's immense figure loose in all direction. Her scream turned halfway into a startled shriek of surprise before taking another lap or two of her chest and coming out as a belch.

“Yes!” Zelly said, snatching it out the air. “To the victor go the spoils!”

Gizz just let her head clonk back on the floor and passed into a dreamless sleep.

She woke up the better part of a day later. Stretching out on the floor, she took several deep, oxygen-filled breaths, enjoying the way her chest had space to expand now. Her skin still showed angry red stripes where the breastplate had squeezed her, but otherwise she was much improved, and felt better than she had in days.

“Zelly?” she called, getting to her feet. The elf was gone, but there were still a few dumplings in the basket. Gizz munched on them as she wandered through the empty house. It felt so different now that she'd almost tripled in size. She had to ease herself through doors sideways, and was even forced to suck her stomach in to make it through a couple of them. It was a good thing she didn't wear boots, because she'd never be able to get down to lace them up. She sighed, patting the soft, blubbery expanse of her body. She wasn't going to be fighting any battles any time soon. Only a few weeks ago she'd been lean and rugged—now she couldn't manage more than a slow waddle.

Good thing I'm a wealthy conqueror, she reminded herself.

On the front table she found a letter written in a neat, looping elven script.

Dear Gizz,

Sorry I had to leave before you work up. I've been away too long, and I wanted to get this breastplate back as soon as I could. I just want to say that I thoroughly enjoyed fattening you up. Let's do it again sometime!

Gizz laughed. “How much fatter can I get?”

Of course, it's more fun to fatten up a thin girl, isn't it? So you'll have to work off those extra pounds before we meet again.

Gizz snorted at that. Not likely! She *owned* this town now. And she still had plenty of coin and valuables. Even without her skeletons, she'd be eating very, very well for the foreseeable future, and she wouldn't be lifting a finger to do it, thank you very much.

And in order to help you work them off, you cute little blubberpot, I've arranged for you to do a little running. See, I can't let all those poor villagers be homeless wanderers, living in fear of the undead. So I'm planning on telling them where you are...and that you don't have your skeletons any more...and that you're so fat and lazy now you can barely move. I guess they might be a little mad at you. Maybe you should think about moving on?

Gizz dropped the letter and gulped. Her ears pricked. She could hear them, far away, but coming closer. Footsteps. Angry muttering. The roar of flaming torches.

She glanced out the window and ducked quickly down again. They were nearly here already! If she'd woken up just five minutes later—ooh, if she ever got her hands on that Zelly—!

They were heading right for the front door. Her only escape route was the window on the other side of the house. If she could squeeze through that and make it to the forest.

Her heart sank when she saw it. Emphasis on *squeeze!* Had it always been that small? And it was so high up! She was out of breath just from waddling from one side of the house to the other.

“The beast is upstairs!” someone yelled. Gizz cursed herself. Of course the floorboards had creaked and groaned like a chorus of banshees under her bulk. If only she'd been quieter...somehow...

She hauled herself up the teetering tower of junk under the window and thrust her head and shoulders through. That was the easy part. Next came her bust, which she squeezed through one breast at a time. And then she faced the real struggle—her belly. Her waistline was *so much* bigger than the window. This was going to be *impossible*.

Calm down. Breathe. Just take it one roll at a time.

Inch by inch, she worked herself through. The rough, splintery wood scraped against her layers of flab. Slowly she flowed through the window, letting her weight do the work, like a dumpling being forced down an overfull throat. Eventually, there was more of her outside the window than inside, and once she reached that point—

Crack! The windowframe splintered around her mass, and she rolled forward, bouncing against the ground like a rubbery, blubbery ball. She lay there for a moment, dazed. She had to get up. There was no way they hadn't heard her weight slamming into the ground.

She heaved herself to her feet, stumbled out of the crater she'd made in the soft soil, and lumbered for the woods. Sweat streamed down her huge bulk and flew off in a wet, steamy shower with every bounce. Her weak, unexercised legs could barely hold her up. But she had to keep going! She had to run until she was sure she wasn't being followed.

Maybe, she thought, dizzy with exhaustion, losing a *few* pounds wouldn't hurt.

Behind her, Zelly smiled. “Well, you've got your village back,” she told the farmer beside her, clapping him on the back. “I told you that a show of force would drive out the beast!”

“And you're sure she won't return?”

“Don't worry. I'll track her down,” the elf assured him. “Just look at the trail she's leaving! Like a rampaging elephant. I'll get her, don't worry. Now, about my reward...”

“I wish we could offer more,” the farmer said, handing over a hefty bag of coins.

“Oh, this is *plenty*.”

She was already imagining how many dumplings she could buy. By the time she caught up to Gizz, the bugbear was going to be *awfully* hungry...