

THE GLEN OF THE ALSEIDS-Part 2

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The moon waxed in the sky, rounder and rounder, and Lydia grew with it. Her alseid sisters stuffed her with so much food on a daily basis it was almost as if they were *trying* to fatten her up. But that was ridiculous. Surely they only meant to be nice, only meant to make up for how they'd treated her in the past--thought as Lydia lazed away day after day, too bloated to do more than nap away the hours, she couldn't help but think they were going just a bit too far.

"Have another bite," Astra said with a smile, waving a slice of ripe, firm peach under Lydia's nose. Lydia, slumped against the accommodating roots of an old oak, opened her mouth and accepted it onto her tongue. It was good, but oh, she was so tired of eating. It felt like she'd done nothing but eat and sleep for months now.

She tugged her chiton up self-consciously, trying to keep herself from bulging out of it--she'd grown so big, so quickly, and she'd been too full and tired to collect new reeds to re-weave it. Her belly tested the tensile strength of the dry reeds, pulling them taut and stretching the weave so that squares of pale flesh peeked through. When she struggled out of it tonight, her whole body would be a grid of angry red lines.

"One more," Astra said, "for me." She tapped Lydia's nose with something soft and plump.

"Oh, Astra," Lydia groaned, "no more. I'm too full."

"I've heard that before," Astra chided. "We both know you're not. Come on, open wide."

"No, really," Lydia pleaded. "Everyone's been giving me so much today. Even more than usual. I can't keep on like this."

"Just oooooone more bite," Astra urged. Lydia sighed and took one...more... bite, forcing it down without even tasting it. She shifted again, and belched, expelling a cloud of glowing spores which danced in front her eyes.

Those eyes widened in realization. *Foxfires!* She looked up at the stars, glittering bright and clear in the otherwise-empty sky. "Astra," she said nervously, "is this--the Night of No Moon?"

Astra looked surprised. "You know what? I think you're right," she said. "Imagine that. Oh well, don't worry about that. You just sit there and relax, and I'll fill you with all the foxfires you can eat!"

"I *can't*. I can't eat another bite," Lydia moaned.

"Well, you've *got* to eat foxfires," Astra said. "You've got to eat your quota or you'll get sick."

She's right, Lydia realized miserably. *Oh, why did I have to eat so much today? I'll burst if I eat any more and if I don't, I'll wither away!*

"Here we go," Astra said, pushing a glowing double-fistful of mushrooms in Lydia's face. Lydia opened her mouth and took them in. She sat there, cheeks bulging, wondering if she'd explode if she swallowed.

"Buff whaff aboo da truff?" she mumbled, spraying luminous drool.

"What?"

With a tremendous effort, Lydia forced the mouthful down. "But what about that troll?" she asked. "She's sure to come back tonight and hunt for more of us. What are we going to do? Shouldn't we make--*urpp*--make a plan?"

"We've got a plan," Astra said. "The troll's not going to eat any of *us* tonight. You see, dearest Lydia, we decided that the best way to insure our safety was to prepare a sacrifice. The biggest, fattest, juiciest sacrifice you ever saw." She pinched one of Lydia's plump cheeks. "And I'd say she'd just about ready!"

Lydia's blood ran cold. "What--what are you saying?"

"Why, we're going to let the troll eat you while the rest of us stay out of her way, of course. You're huge enough now to sate even that greedy-guts for long enough for the rest of us to pick what

we need. Now, we just have to wait until sunset and--oh my! Take a look at that! Why, the sun is going down right *now*.”

She tousled Lydia's hair. “Goodbye forever, Lydia. Just think, you fat lump, you'll finally be worth something to somebody--dinner for a troll!” With a laugh as musical as the tinkling of broken glass, she slipped into the woods. Moments later, the last of the daylight abandoned Lydia too, leaving her alone in the dark.

Hot tears welled up in Lydia's eyes. It felt like someone was squeezing her heart. *But there's no time to cry about it now*, she thought. *If I don't get out of here, I'll be eaten!*

She rocked back and forth. Fear had sliced through the lethargy of overfullness, but her body was still so heavy, it was hard to stand up. Hard? Make that practically impossible.

No wonder they fed me so much today, she thought miserably. *I'm too stuffed to move!*

But she couldn't let herself give up. Bracing against the tree, she pushed herself up, inch by inch, until she was in a standing position--well, mostly. She was still reclining against the trunk, letting it support her weight. She lay there for a minute, catching her breath. Her belly, distended like an overripe melon, rose and fell with each gasping breath, and she could hear as well as feel the reeds snapping in her chiton. Seams of pain were stitched down both of her sides. She felt ready to split.

Think! Think! Find a hiding place! Her eyes searched the darkness. Most of the burrows and hidey-holes she knew of were out of the question, now--she was too big. But maybe the trees could provide at least a little cover.

She waddled slowly to the edge of the clearing, feeling like a pregnant ox. She just might be able to wriggle her way into that copse of trees--she didn't think Aragah could squeeze in there. The problem was, she wasn't sure if she could squeeze in either. She maneuvered herself sideways, trying to slip in. It was no good--her belly was in the way. Maybe if she hadn't eaten so much, she could have squashed it through, but not now.

She heard a stifled snicker from the bushes. The troll? No, it was too high-pitched. They were watching her, she realized. Watching to see if she'd do her part and be eaten. There was none of the usual running and squealing of the Night of No Moon. All eyes were on her.

Her cheeks burned, and her heartbeat pounded in her temples. They'll all done this to her. Fattened her like a pig and left her to die. She couldn't just roll over and let them.

She flattened her back against the bark of one of the trees, stood on tiptoe, and shimmied around it until she felt the rough bark of the tree across from it rubbing against her belly. She grimaced and kept going. The bark ripped through what was left of her chiton and scraped the soft, tender flesh underneath.

Her ankles gave out, just for a split second, but that was enough. No longer on tiptoe, she sank down a crucial inch between the trunks. She felt like a fat grape being pinched between two powerful fingers, squeezed nearly to popping. She wriggled and fought. It was no good. Her bulging belly had well and truly wedged her in.

She went limp. Tears dampened her cheeks.

“Well, well,” purred a low, gravelly voice near her ear, “what's this?”

She was rigid again, with fear. *The troll. The troll is here!*

“Where were *you* last time I was here?” Aragah continued. “I'm sure I couldn't have overlooked such a wonderfully plump little meatball.”

Aragah stepped forward and squinted down at the trapped alseid. Lydia could just make her out in the starlight and the ambient mushroom glow. Her stomach was flat again, an empty sack waiting to be filled. She licked her lips and leaned forward.

“Wait,” she said. “I've seen you before. Part of you, at least.” She chuckled. “The smaller part. You certainly packed it on fast, didn't you?”

“Go away!” Lydia sobbed. She knew it was pointless, but it was all she could think to do.

“Sorry, but I'm too hungry for that, and you--” She grinned. “You, my luscious not-so-little

morsel, are a whole meal all on your own. I wish the rest of those bite-sized snacks were as big as you. I'd never go hungry again! Now, up you come!"

She braced one foot against a tree, seized Lydia under the arms with her massive hands, and pulled her loose with a pop. Lydia whimpered.

"Is she going to eat her?" Kekepania murmured from her perch high in the tree. Astra elbowed her in the ribs.

"Shhh! You want her to hear us?" she whispered. "Of course she's going to eat her."

"What are we going to do next month?" Kekepania fretted, her voice rising. "All this does is buy us some time, and next month, when Lydia's not around--"

"Shut up!" Astra hissed. She lowered her voice. "Did you think I hadn't thought of that? We'll just have to pick another sacrifice, that's all. Have you noticed how fat Ulyssa is getting? She obviously can't control herself around all this food."

"Are you saying--but she's our *friend!*"

"Would you rather the troll ate *you?*" Astra asked.

Kekepania's lower lip quivered. "N-no," she said.

"Good." Astra smiled. *And after she's gone, I'll feed you up, Keke. And after you, there are plenty of others. Enough to make sure it'll never, ever be me.*

As soon as Astra turned away, Kekepania's eyes narrowed. *Ulyssa's a better friend than you are, she thought, even if she is getting fat. If it comes down to it, I'll--I'll tie you up with that precious blonde hair of yours and stuff you until you're twice as big as Lydia!*

Aragah hefted Lydia, testing her weight. "You're even plumper than I thought," she said, grinning. "Oh, you're going to feel wonderful on the way down. A bellyful in a single bite!"

She opened her mouth wide, wider, even wider, and Lydia felt the rough, trollish lips wrap around her neck and slide downward, engulfing her shoulders, slithering over her breasts, stretching around her stomach. She was being pulled down into the noxious depths of the troll's belly. It was all over for her. All over.

"Gmmfph." The grunt seemed to echo all around her, shaking the walls of glistening troll meat. She felt the troll's lips fighting for purchase on her flesh, trying to swallow her down, but she wasn't moving.

In a wet rush, she popped out the troll's mouth again and landing heavily on her rear. She looked up at Aragah, who was rubbing her jaw and looking at her in amazement.

"Well, this is a hell of a thing," she said. "I've eaten gnomes and nixies, fauns, fairies, even the odd dwarf, and you, my little dumpling, are the first one I've encountered who was actually so fat I couldn't swallow her. I never thought my throat would be defeated on the field of dinner, but damned if you didn't do it. I guess this is your lucky day."

She raised her voice. "Your little friend here is too fat to fit down my throat, so she's safe. The rest of you--better run!" She clapped her hands, and the woods came alive. Aseids scattered like rats fleeing a fire. Aragah grinned. "Now that's more like it. A good hunt."

She patted Lydia gently on the head. "If I were you, dear, I'd make sure to keep yourself well-fed. Otherwise I just might be able to swallow you down next time." Then she was off, leaping into the trees like a wolf, jaws salivating and eyes flashing. Shocked, Lydia could only watch her go.

They gathered in the morning mist, filthy and exhausted, and counted heads. There were five less of them now.

"*You,*" Astra snarled at Lydia. Her golden hair was a tangled rat's nest of leaves and twigs from her flight through the underbrush. "You *finally* could have been useful, but you couldn't even get *eaten* right!"

“What are we going to do?” Kekepania wailed, her pale skin streaked with dirt and her cheeks wet with muddy tears. “At this rate we’ll all be eaten before the year is out! We--we have to run--we have to find somewhere else--”

Ulyssa sighed, her eyes falling on the fish-stocked stream, the rich tubers and rices bursting from the ground, the trees groaning with fruit. “What place could we find that’s half as good as here?”

“That’s you all over, Ulyssa, always thinking with your stomach!” Kekepania laughed, a nervous, high-pitched bark. “It’s a wonder you’re not as fat as Lydia!”

“I wish I *was* as fat as Lydia,” Ulyssa shot back. “At least then that troll couldn’t eat me!”

A quiet pall swept over the gathering as her words sank in.

“Maybe--maybe if we *were* fat...” Kekepania began.

“It’s out of the question,” Astra commanded. “We’ll think of another way.”

“What other way?” Kekepania said, approaching a berry-laden bush. “What can we do? We’ve *got* to get fat if we want to live.” She picked a berry and popped it into her mouth.

“Stop!” Astra cried. “Think of your figure, Kekepania. You can’t *do* this!”

“But I don’t want to be eaten,” Kekepania sniffled, nibbling on another berry.

“Don’t you eat *one more berry!*” Astra commanded, drawing herself up. Defiantly, Kekepania plucked another and popped it into her mouth. Then another. And another. Juice ran freely down her chin.

“You’re going to be *fat!*” Astra screeched.

“She’s going to be alive,” Ulyssa said, pulling a fat, ripe banana down from the trees. Astra whirled and slapped it out of her hand.

“Don’t be stupid,” she snarled. “Kekepania will give up when she starts getting chubby. You’ll see. But *you!*” Her mouth curved up in a wicked sneer. “You’re already chubby. You can’t afford to get any fatter.”

Ulyssa picked up the banana. “Kekepania’s not the only one eating.” She gestured around herself. The other alseids, already tired and hungry, were descending on the natural bounty, licking their lips. Ulyssa popped the end of the banana in her mouth and let it slide down her throat whole. “You say I’m chubby, I say I have a head start.”

“Stop!” pleaded Astra, her eyes darting desperately from face to face. “Stop! Stop! Don’t you see, you idiots, if you all get fat--then I have to get fat *too!*”

She sank to her knees, sniffing, the sound of rustling undergrowth and smacking lips rising all around her.

They went through the glen like locusts, devouring every scrap of food they could find. Trees were stripped of fruit, bushes scoured of berries, fields of wild potatoes and mushrooms ripped from the ground as if they were nuggets of gold. The alseids threw themselves wholeheartedly into their new gluttonous lifestyle. Each day became a languorous endurance contest, a slow-motion race against time and the limits of their capacity. Each night became a wild bacchanal of ever-greater feats of eating and lovemaking in which they indulged until they were too exhausted and too full to move.

The greatest feast of them all was came when the Night of No Moon rolled around again, and every alseid knew a few extra inches of waistline could mean the difference between life and death. When the first glow lit the underbrush, they rolled forward in a tidal wave of flesh, and for the next several hours, they stuffed themselves as if their lives depended on it.

“I’d like...to see that dumb troll...eat me now,” Ulyssa groaned as she lay splayed on the ground. “I think I’ve eaten...every foxfire...in the forest.”

“Not all,” Kekepania belched. “There’s one wedged in your bellybutton.”

“Great,” Ulyssa said, raising her arm weakly. “I can’t...possibly...reach that.”

Lydia helpfully plucked the glowing chunk from its perch atop Ulyssa's distended belly and popped it between the prone girl's plump lips.

"Thanks," Ulyssa managed, patting Lydia's surprisingly slim calf. The poor girl had been run so ragged catering to the others that she'd burned off most of her extra flesh. She was still a little plump, but compared to all the others, she was the slimmest by far.

"Bring me more," Astra wheezed. "I have more room left. I have to be...I have to be bigger."

"You look big enough to me," Lydia reassured her. She looked around at the clearing, strewn with bloated alseids. It looked like a field of puffball mushrooms. And Astra, the greediest, the most demanding, and the most determined, was the puffiest ball of all.

"Shut up!" Astra sobbed. "Don't you think I *know* my figure is ruined? At least I'll get the pleasure of seeing you be eaten!"

"Where is...that troll...anyway?" Ulyssa asked. "The night's half over...and she...and she..."

"She's right here," rasped Aragah's voice, and the troll slipped out into the clearing. The alseids, smeared with spores, illuminated her like paper lanterns, highlighting her muscular form. Her ribs were no longer so visible. She'd been eating well.

"My, my, my," Aragah said, grinning. "All laid out like dishes at a feast, and each plumper and fatter than the last. I don't know where to start!"

"Lydia's the only one of us small enough to fit down your throat!" Astra snapped. "You told us yourself how we could save ourselves from you. Now hurry up and eat her and go to bed hungry, you stupid ox!"

"Giving me orders?" Aragah said, striding over to Astra and sizing up her considerable size.

"Quite the bloated little tyrant, aren't we? I wonder, can you run away from me? Can you even move?"

"I don't have to run if I'm too big to swallow," Astra said, glaring up at her.

Aragah hoisted Astra off the ground like a sack of potatoes, winked at her, and swallowed her whole in one enormous mouthful.

The air thinned as the alseids drew in a collective gasp of shock. Aragah patted her bulging belly. "*Ohhhhh*, that's good. What a mouthful! I knew if I just gave you a little nudge in the right direction, you'd fatten yourselves up for me, and did you ever do it! A big, juicy, thirty-course meal beyond my wildest dreams!" She rubbed her hands together. "I don't know *who* to eat next!"

Gasps of confusion and dismay gave way to shrieks of fear as the truth sunk in. Aragah plucked them from the ground like ripe, plump fruits, swallowing them whole, one after another.

On her previous hunts, Aragah had eaten until she couldn't find any more prey. Tonight was different. Her prey couldn't run--it was too gorged even to crawl. It couldn't hide--even if they could have moved, the alseids were too big to fit into any of their hidey-holes. And so the "hunt" went on and on and on, as the night wore on and the stars slid across the sky, until Aragah collapsed on the grass, stuffed to utter repletion.

"H-hello?" Lydia called from her perch in the trees. "Miss Aragah?"

Aragah opened one eye. "Oh, it's you. Go away. You're too skinny to eat now, even if I could. And I can't." She patted one bulging flank and belched loudly. "What a *meal!* I've never been *completely* full in my *life* before."

"How do you know?" Lydia asked.

"What?"

"How do you know you're *completely* full?" Lydia asked again. "There are still a few of us left, after all."

"Lydia!" Ulyssa hissed. "No!" Kekepania just whimpered.

"This might be the only chance you get to *really* stuff yourself," Lydia continued. "I say polish the rest of us off and then move on!"

"The rest of 'us', eh?" Aragah chuckled. "Except for you up there, of course. How cold! I don't mean to say they don't deserve it, but still...in another life, you could have made an excellent troll." She

struggled to her feet, her stomach swinging in front of her. "But you're right. I don't get to do this often. And you're all so *good!* Maybe...just one more..."

She snatched up one of the last alseids--she had to splay her legs like a giraffe just to bend down--and gulped the shrieking girl down whole.

"Whew," she said, sitting down. "Whoof. These are big portions."

"Don't give up now," Lydia said, blank-faced. "There's only two bites left."

"Don't encourage her!" Kekepania shrieked, fat tears rolling down her fat cheeks. "I'm sorry, Lydia! I'm s-s-sorry for what we did. *Help!*"

"I don't know," Aragah moaned, adjusting her stretched-to-its-limit loincloth. "I'm soooo *full.*"

"Go ahead," Lydia said. "Finish her off."

The troll scooted over to the whimpering Kekepania and, with a few strained chokes, swallowed her down whole. She rolled over, wincing.

"Just *one* more," Lydia urged.

"N-no more," Aragah said. "No more food. I can't do it."

"Look how ripe and juicy she is," Lydia cajoled. "So soft and helpless. She can't even move."

"I can barely move myself," Aragah grunted. "But..she does look...good. Oh, but I really, really can't. I couldn't even eat a mouse right now."

"I'm bigger than a mouse!" Ulyssa cried. "I'm huge! Just look at me! Imagine how filling I am! You'll have a stomachache for *sure!* Lydia! *Quit sitting there and do something!*"

"Eat her," Lydia stated. "She's naturally chubby. I bet that makes her the most delicious one of all. Smell her. She smells like watermelons."

"*Lydiaaaaaaa!*" Ulyssa wailed. Aragah sighed and crawled towards Ulyssa on her hands and knees, her low-hanging belly dragging on the ground.

"*One* more," she said around a belch. "Just *one* more."

"*Lydia, you--you--*"

And then all was silence in the glen, but for the chirp of crickets, the distant twitter of a songbird, and Aragah's shallow, raspy breaths.

"Oogh," she said. "Ooh. I already regret that. Too much." She rolled over on her side and let her tongue loll from her mouth. "Uggh. I'm so full I'm hallucinating. I think I hear music."

"It's a bird," Lydia said. She smiled. "They always sing to greet the sunrise."

"Sunrise?" Aragah said sleepily. Then her eyes widened. "*Sunrise?*"

"I don't know if you can see it from down there," Lydia said, "but the sky is already turning pink. The sun will be up any moment."

"Uggh," Aragah grunted, dragging herself along the ground. "You nasty little thing. I guess you think you're pretty clever. But I can still...move. I'm going back to my bridge."

Slowly, arduously, she hauled her immense body down to the stream and along the banks, leaving a deep trench in the sand where her belly dragged. Lydia followed her, careful to keep a safe distance, though she didn't think the troll would turn back now. The sky continued to lighten.

"You know, that was a pretty good trick," Aragah said, shooting Lydia one final glare. "Feel free to gloat. You've got one moon to do it in, and nobody left to do it to. And when your time is up, I'm going to gobble you down too-- oof?"

She stuck halfway under the bridge, too bloated to squeeze her whole body under the low stone arch. "Did you eat too much?" Lydia said quietly.

Aragah's legs kicked against the wet sand. She pushed forward, clawing at the ground, trying to force herself under, but she was simply too big. She laughed, a desperate, strained sound.

"Oh well," she cackled, "at least I won't die hungry."

Then the first rays of sunlight sliced through the trees, and silently, with no fanfare at all, Aragah was lifeless stone.

Lydia stepped forward, hesitantly at first, expecting the troll to turn around and attack. When

she didn't, Lydia took another step, and another, and then she was grabbing up a fallen stone from the bridge and bringing it down again and again on the rocky boulder that had been Aragah.

The troll's stomach had been stretched to its limits, and the thin shell of stone cracked like an egg. The swallowed alseids tumbled out like an avalanche of piglets, sweaty, crying, and gasping for air. Their bodies were smeared with rock dust, the remains of Aragah's stomach acid. Some of the earlier victims sported painful red rashes, the very beginnings of the digestive process, but the alseids--at least the ones eaten tonight--were all alive and unharmed.

"I have to admit," Ulyssa said, "that--that was actually a pretty good trick."

"You saved us!" Kekepania sniveled, her nose flowing freely down her face. She grabbed Lydia in a pudgy, sticky bear hug. "I'm so sorry for how we treated you!"

"It's okay," Lydia said, looking down. "I--I just wanted us to be safe, that's all. All of us."

"*Safe?*" Astra screeched. She'd been the first eaten, and her skin was one big tender lobster-red welt. Her golden locks had been burned down to a few dingy strands plastered to her throbbing scalp. "Just look at me! Look at my *hair!*"

"Oh, shut up, Astra," Ulyssa said. "We all look awful, so it doesn't matter, does it?" She turned to Lydia, who was trying to squeeze out of Kekepania's grip. "We've been terrible to you. I think we all owe you an apology--for real this time."

There was a murmur of agreement from the crowd.

"And I say--whatever punishment you think we should have, we'll take it." Ulyssa bowed her head. The other alseids followed suit. Kekepania blubbered and blew her nose in Lydia's shoulder.

"W-well," Lydia said, blushing. "I guess the only thing that really comes to mind is--"

Astra stamped her foot, wincing at the pain. "No!" she snapped. "This...this ugly little *troll* is *not* in charge of me. Whatever the punishment is, I *refuse* to do it!"

"I was just going to say," Lydia continued, "we're all a little out of shape, even me." She patted her belly, which did stick out, if less so than everyone's else. "So I thought a good punishment would be to order everyone to lose weight. You know, less food and lots of exercise."

"I think that's a great idea," Ulyssa said. She turned to Astra with a sickly sweet smile. "Oh, don't worry, Astra. We'll make sure *you* don't lose any weight until the rest of us have shaped up. Even if we have to take turns stuffing food down your throat. Hmm--I guess you're going to be the fattest one in the glen for a while. You always did like to stand out."

Astra fumed, turning even redder, as the others left her behind. Ulyssa took one of Lydia's hands in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Thanks," she whispered.

Lydia's heart swelled as she walked, surrounded by her sisters, into another perfect morning.