

THE GLEN OF THE ALSEIDS

by Supercake Studio (<http://www.patreon.com/supercakestudio>)

In the lush, cloud-shrouded mountains of the interior lay an especially fertile glen. Sun, warm rain, and rich soil combined to bring forth huge harvests of sweet, delectable fruit. Ferns sprouted along the banks of the creek. Crawling and scurrying things filled the valley, well-fed and content.

Some say it was the beauty and bounty of the glen that first brought the alseids to live there. Others says that it was their presence that first blessed the glen and brought forth its treasures. For whatever the reason, the alseids and the glen had been together for centuries. There were about forty of them. There had always been about that many. Once in a great while, an accident would befall one, and she would perish. Equally rarely, an especially ripe and fat piece of fruit would grow, bending its unlucky branch until it snapped. In the resulting splatter, a new alseid would be born, blinking in confusion and scraping fruit pulp out of her eyes.

But what is an alseid, exactly? Sometimes known as glen nymphs, alseids are much shorter than humans, about two and a half feet tall, and have rather large heads and big, dewy eyes. Aside from this, you might mistake one for a lovely human woman. The alseids don't have the cloven hooves and tough, bony back-plates of the oread, or a dryad's leafy hair. While oreads tend towards a voluptuous stockiness and dryads are slim and willowy, the alseids are just about average in build. They are, however, very beautiful, and nobody knows this more than the alseids themselves.

"Isn't that the most beautiful sight you've ever seen?" sighed Astra, gazing down at her reflection in the crystal stream. She ran a comb through blonde locks almost as long as she was tall—and she *was* tall for an alseid, nearly three feet. She wore a chiton of pink spider silk.

"It is, isn't it?" agreed Kekepania, look down at her own reflection, at her piles of coppery curls and the dusting of freckles across her face and shoulders. Her chiton was green, made of tiny leaves sewn together like a coat of mail.

"It's utterly gorgeous," said Ulyssa, rolling over onto her back and stretching to get a new angle. Dark-haired and dark-eyed, she wore a chiton of tortoise-skin, with a pair of polished shells supporting her ample bust. "I just love this stream!"

There was a splash, and the surface of the stream rippled. The three alseids looked up, irritation creasing their doll-like features.

"Ugh," Kekepania sniffed, just loud enough so that the intruder would be sure to overhear. "It's *her*."

"Can't you wash that rank old thing out somewhere else, Lydia?" Ulyssa groaned. "*Some* of us are trying to perform our ablutions in peace."

"Sorry!" Lydia said, clutching her woven-grass chiton tightly under the water. "I just wanted to have it clean for tonight."

"Who cares if your clothes are clean?" Ulyssa said. "It's the Night of No Moon! The one night when...when nobody can *see* you!"

She shuddered in horror.

"Now, girls," Astra said sternly, "try to be a *little* more understanding. It may be an ordeal for *us* not to be seen, but I'm sure it's very important to Lydia to have at least one night when nobody is goggling at her, not that you can blame them."

She glanced sideways to make sure her barb had struck home. Lydia stared down into the stream and scrubbed furiously. The alseids giggled. It was true Lydia didn't look quite like the other alseids. Her hair was a mousy brown. Her eyebrows were thick and heavy. Her ears stuck out like jug handles. She was just so...so *ugly*! Or at least *imperfect*—and really, wasn't that the same thing?

She scrubbed, and scrubbed, and tried to force back the hot lump in her throat.

The Night of No Moon was the only night that the foxfire mushrooms sprouted. The alseids may have hated the darkness, but they needed the foxfires, which contained a rich magical residue no other source in the glen could provide. Without it, the nymphs would sicken and die within months. So they made the best of their monthly chore by turning the night into a celebration, a festival of stolen kisses and secret romance, and many alseids could be found twined together in the underbrush, dusted with foxfire spores and shivering with the rush of fresh magic pulsing through their bodies.

They scurried between the dark trunks, tiny feet pattering along well-worn paths, the blue-green foxfires illuminating the underbrush from beneath. The woods were filled with laughter and shrieks.

Lydia searched alone, as always, moving slowly and carefully, poking beneath bushes and along the sides of rotting logs. Without distractions, she was able to find more mushrooms rings, and without anyone to share them with, she was able to have every last one all to herself. It was only midnight, and she was already stuffed with enough foxfires to last her a year.

I'll be sick if I eat any more, she thought. But if she stopped looking, if she stopped shoveling down the magic-laced food, there would be nothing to do but listen to everyone else having fun without her.

She plucked another glowing cap and sank her teeth deep into the luminous flesh. Two tears marked dark trails on her dust-covered cheeks.

She felt a hand on her rump, and another twined around her, slipping nimbly into her chiton to cup one breast. "Hi there!" someone cooed in her ear. "Aren't *you* the lucky one tonight? You're practically glowing."

Tiny teeth nibbled playfully on her earlobe. Lydia shivered. The hand on her rump slid around, prodding the firmness of her stomach.

"Ooh, you feel so *full!* Haven't you had enough?" the voice pleaded. A warm, naked body pressed into Lydia's back. "Why don't you share a few finds with me? I *promise* I'll be grateful."

Lydia's insides started to feel hot and gooey. Even if the girl grabbing her was only after a few free mushroom caps—how long had it been since anyone had touched her like this? Not since they all decided she was ugly.

She turned and smiled shyly at the alseid behind her, a short girl with a snub nose and a shock of platinum-blond hair. "Oh, D-Delphine. Hello!"

Delphine's body was already covered with glowing handprints and smears of spores. She'd rather have someone else do her gathering for her, and she didn't care who knew it or what they asked of her in return—but at the sight of Lydia, she recoiled, yanking her hands away as if she'd been holding a burning log. Her face twisted in disgust.

"I'll share my foxfires," Lydia said quickly, "and there's no need for you to do anything—I can help you find more, if you want—" She stepped forward, holding out the half-eaten cap.

Delphine made a retching noise and slapped Lydia's hand away. The cap bounced into the underbrush. "I didn't know it was *you!* I'm going to tell everyone what you tried to make me do, you—you ugly *troll!*"

She whirled and stalked off into the darkness. Lydia got down on her hands and knees, searching for the cap in the tall grass. When she found it, she shoved it into her mouth whole and chewed, crumbs of mushroom and fat, heavy tears spilling from her face together.

The night was split by a shriek quite unlike the screams of joy. This was a cry of anguish and terror, and it came from the direction in which Delphine had disappeared. Lydia sat up, her heart pounding like a rabbit's, listening.

A moment later, Delphine appeared again, but for a moment Lydia couldn't tell what she was doing. It looked like she was...*floating* in midair, bobbing like a lantern a few feet off the ground, her feet kicking weakly.

Then, in the light emanating from Delphine's dusty body, Lydia saw the creature which held the alseid aloft, its claws knotting through her hair. It was towering by nymph standards, almost six feet tall, and heavily muscled. Sharp white teeth glinted in the darkness.

It took another step forward, into the starlight, and Lydia saw more detail. It—she—was a troll, a *real* troll.

None of them had ever seen a troll before, but she recognized it from the old stories. The muscular limbs, the tough hide, the nose as prominent as a spur of rock, the curling horns and the shaggy mane of hair. A ragged fur loincloth hung around her wide hips.

The troll looked at Lydia through narrowed yellow eyes and opened her fearsome jaws. She grinned and raised Delphine over her head.

“No! No! Not me!” Delphine wailed. “Eat her! Eat *her!*” She thrashed uselessly in the air. The blue-green glow illuminated the troll's gleaming green and glistening tongue. “Help me, Lydia! Help! *Pleeeee—*”

Delphine's glow went out as she slid feet-first into the waiting throat. The troll's washboard abdomen bulged as it filled with thirty pounds of terrified nymph. She licked a few flecks of spores from her full, plump lips and grinned at Lydia.

“Oh, hello there,” she chuckled, in a wet, throaty voice, “why, yes, I *would* like seconds.”

Lydia turned and ran. The troll dropped to all fours, loping behind her like an ape. She was fast, even with a bellyful of food, but Lydia was smaller and more maneuverable, and she had desperation on her side. She scrambled between tightly woven roots and into a tunnel under the brambles.

“*Troll!*” she screamed. “Troll! Run! Troll!”

She pulled herself up into the branches of a cherry tree and kept as still as she could. A painful stitch was traveling up her side, the consequences of running on a full stomach. The forest around her rang with giggles and pretend shrieks from the others as they joined in the game. Then, terribly, a real scream split the night and was cut off with a sudden slurp, and the laughter changed to genuine terror. Not all at once, but unevenly, in waves, as the realization that they were in real danger spread from group to group. Gathering parties broke apart and scattered, into trees, into burrows, into anywhere that might be safe.

Lydia curled up into the smallest ball she could and drove her fingers deep into her ears. She choked down the urge to expel everything she'd eaten. She couldn't afford the chance the troll would smell it, or see the bright glow.

I just have to make it to dawn, she told herself. Just until dawn. Trolls have to hide from the sun. If I make it through the night, I'm safe.

She didn't remember falling asleep, but when she woke up she was soaked with dew and nearly blue with cold. She slid down out of the tree, massaging sore limbs. Her lower abdomen felt bloated and heavy, and she hurried behind a bush to relieve herself before seeking out the others.

They gathered in the center of the glen for a headcount, with alseids trickling in throughout the morning as each worked up the nerve to leave her hiding places. Three of them, including Delphine, never showed up.

“How could this happen?” Kekepania fretted. “Where did that horrible thing come from?”

“A better question is, where is she now?” another alseid asked. “She could come back for fourth helpings any second now!”

“She won't,” Astra said. “She's a troll, and they can't abide the light of the sun, you know, either directly, or reflected as moonlight. We're safe until the next Night of No Moon.”

“Sure, and *then* she comes out of hiding again and gobbles us up!” Kekepania wailed. “She could be anywhere!”

“Nonsense,” Astra lectured. “Trolls prefer a dark, moist place near running water. She’ll be under the old bridge, if she’s anywhere.”

“Then I say we finish her off there, now, while the beast is still sleeping off her meal.” This was Phyllis, the strongest and the bravest of the alseids. Muscles rippled under her bronze skin, and her chiton was soft wolf-leather.

“Agreed,” Astra said. She dragged Kekepania and Ulyssa along too, although the two of them wailed and whined, because “if I have to risk my precious skin, then you have to risk your precious-but-not-quite-as-precious-as-mine skins, as well.” Soon the makeshift party was approaching the old bridge, a low, crumbling stone arch hanging with moss, and peered into the shadows.

“There!” Phyllis hissed, pointing.

The troll was sprawled out carelessly on the broad stretch of sand, one foot dangling into the stream. Her face was smeared with spores, and one sharp-clawed hand rested limply on her bloated stomach, which rose and fell with each slow, slumbering breath.

“It’s a wonder she doesn’t bring the whole bridge down on herself, snoring like that,” Astra mused.

“Do you think they’re—still alive?” Kekepania murmured nervously.

“Of course not!” Ulyssa snapped. “Can you imagine living through *that*? I’d rather be dead!”

Phyllis hoisted a heavy rock onto one broad shoulder. “Only one way to find out. Brain the bitch while she sleeps and slice her gullet open.”

She tiptoed forward, lifting the rock over her head. As she approached, the troll snorted and jerked. Phyllis took a step back. The creatures’ lips twitched, and one eye opened lazily.

Before the alseid could move, the troll’s arms shot out and seized her by the shoulders. The rock tumbled to the wet sand with a useless thud.

“Who are you?” Phyllis demanded. “Why are you here?”

The troll’s thick black tongue lolled over her impressive armory of teeth. “My name is Aragah, called Aragah the Ravenous—thought I must admit that three of you at once does rather take the edge off.” She belched. “Still, I couldn’t call myself a troll if I turned down a meal when it walks right up to me. If you’re *all* so obliging, they’ll have to change my name to Aragah the Overstuffed.”

She hoisted Phyllis up until the alseid straddled her, resting her against the lump of her stomach.

“Ah, you’re a nice, meaty thing, too! You’ll do very well indeed.” Then she yanked the warrior forward, opened her mouth wide, and gulped her down headfirst. Her torso bulged as the heavy bolus of muscle passed through her, straining the fur harness that supported her breasts. With one final convulsion, she forced the meal down, her already-swollen stomach distending even further.

The other three scampered back in alarm. They all tried to hide behind each other, which resulted in them falling over in a pile.

“What’ll we do?” Kekepania wailed. “We’re all going to die!”

“Oh, don’t be stupid. She can’t eat anyone *else*,” Astra said. “Look at that gut! She’s ready to burst!”

“I volunteer *you* to go test that out,” Ulyssa said. Kekepania nodded in agreement.

“If anyone should go it’s you,” Astra countered. “You’re the fattest of us. She couldn’t possibly finish *you* off.”

“I’m not fat! I’m *voluptuous!*” Ulyssa countered hotly. She’d been born of an especially large pumpkin which, being a ground-lying fruit, hadn’t fallen and burst on its own. She’d been forced to eat her way to freedom, emerging days later plump and goo-slick, and her figure had never entirely recovered.

“Ha! Those udders of yours are spilling out of your tortoiseshells,” Astra pointed out. Ulyssa flushed and hastily adjusted herself.

“See? We’re all *useless!*,” Kekepania sobbed. “If Phyllis couldn’t stand up to her, what chance do we have? We’ll all be swallowed whole!”

“Not all of us,” Astra pointed out. “She only got three of us. And that’s only because we didn’t

know she was coming. Next month we'll be on our guard. We'll pick as many mushrooms as we can until we hear her attack, and then we scatter. Up the trees, between the roots, anywhere she can't follow. That way we'll be safe."

"One of us won't be!" Kekepania said, her voice going up an octave. "One of us will be *eaten!*"

"That *is* true," Astra said, looking thoughtful.

"Too bad we can't elect someone," Ulyssa said. "We could get rid of some of the dead weight."

"Dead weight..." Astra murmured. She brightened. "Don't worry, girls. I've got a *brilliant* idea..."

Lydia was down by the river, gathering reeds to repair her torn and tattered chiton, when she heard Astra's musical voice chime out. "Oh, Ly-di-aaa!"

Instinctively, Lydia flinched away from the noise. The reeds parted, and Astra popped her head through and shook out her golden locks. "*There* you are! I've been looking absolutely everywhere for you!"

"You were *looking* for me?" Lydia asked.

"Don't sound so *shocked*, darling! Oh, I know we tease, but we really do love you, you know. And this horrible tragedy...it's really forced me to think about how I've been treating you."

"Really?" Lydia asked, edging away.

"It's not a trick this time! Please, let me make amends." Astra emerged fully from the reeds. She was carrying a half-watermelon shell piled high with fruit. "I made this just for you. Won't you have lunch with me, dear, sweet Lydia?"

At first Lydia suspected something nasty—maybe a hidden pocket of stinkberries, or a wormy apple. But Astra popped a piece of fruit in her mouth without even looking at it. Hesitantly, Lydia took a piece and nibbled it. It was absolutely delicious, so sweet and succulent. She took another bite, then another.

Soon the watermelon shell was empty, and the girls were full. Lydia sighed. "That—that was really good, Astra. I'm sorry I thought you were trying to trick me."

"No tricks here!" Astra said with a sincere smile. "Now you'd better run along. I think Ulyssa mentioned wanting to see you about something. Oh—and come back tomorrow! All your lunches are on *me* from now on!"

"I will!"

Lydia wandered towards Ulyssa's bower near the bend in the stream, smacking her lips to lick off the last of the fruit. She felt warm and full and content for the first time in a long time. As she approached the stream, she smelled something smoky and salty, and as she rounded the bend, she saw her fellow alseid turning a row of fat, fresh-caught fish on a spit.

"Lydia! There you are!" Ulyssa called. "I owe you an apology. The way I've been treating you is just awful. So, I thought I'd invite you the share my catch!"

"I already—" Lydia began, but stopped. Ulyssa was really trying to do something nice for once. It would be rude not to take her up on it. Anyway, that fish did smell *awfully* good...

It tasted awfully good, too, tender and succulent. She polished off a full half-dozen of the shimmering smelt before the spit was empty.

"Thank you," she said, stifling a belch. "They were delicious."

"Won't you come back tomorrow?" Ulyssa said sweetly. "Just one meal can't make up for all I've put you through."

"O-of course!" Lydia said.

Why did I say that? she wondered as she made her way slowly downstream. *I already agreed to have lunch with Astra, and I don't want to eat two lunches every single day!* They'd both been delicious, but she was so *stuffed*—even her loose-fitting chiton showed a gentle curve at her middle

where her too-full stomach bulged. She resolved to find somewhere soft where she could take a nice, long nap.

“Ohhh, Lydia!” called Kekepania's shrill voice. “Where are you?”

“Right—*urpp*—right here,” Lydia called back. “I *do* hope you don't want to ask me to lunch.”

“Lunch? Don't be silly. I already had lunch, haven't you?”

“Yes,” Lydia said gratefully, “twice.”

“Then what you need isn't more lunch,” Kekepania said, running up next to her, “it's dessert!”

“Dess—oh *no*,” Lydia groaned. Kekepania was holding an enormous honeycomb dripping with golden-sweet honey. “Oh, I really can't. It's a nice gesture, but I'm *so* full already...”

Kekepania looked wouldn't. “That's okay, I understand. I've been so awful to you—I can see why you wouldn't want to take anything from me—”

“No, that's not it at all!” Lydia protested. “I would—it's just—oh dear.” Kekepania looked so *hurt*. Lydia winced. *I'm going to have to eat it, aren't I?*

“Maybe a few bites,” she sighed, holding out her hand. She ran her tongue over the rough surface of the comb and lapped up the honey, feeling the sticky sweetness sliding down her throat. Her taste buds rejoiced at the treat even as her overburdened stomach grumbled.

By the time she finally returned to her own modest bower, Lydia was crammed so full she could barely breathe. She curled up in her nest of moss and soft grasses, trying to get comfortable. Her poor body felt like it was half stomach. *Don't tell me I'm going to have to eat three lunches every day*, she groaned to herself. *I'll pop!*

But as disgusting as she felt, she couldn't help but sense a spot of happiness in her, too—though goodness knows how there was any room for *anything* inside her at this point. Still, there it was. Happiness. Finally, the others *liked* her. Finally, she had friends. She'd much rather have an aching stomach than an aching heart—and if she could nurture her new friendships, than eat she would.

And eat she did.

The moon waxed in the sky, rounder and rounder, and Lydia grew with it. Her alseid sisters fed her so much and so often, it was almost as if they were *trying* to fatten her up. But that was ridiculous, Lydia thought. 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 full 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 weeks 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 the new reeds necessary for re-weaving. 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 full up.”

“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 really 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 first stars appearing in the indigo 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 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 almost down right *now*.”

She tousled Lydia's hair. “Goodbye forever, Lydia. Just think, you fat lump, you'll finally be worth something to somebody—even if it is just 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 Lydia.

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. A little more pampering and she'll be perfect.”

“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 meet its match, 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. Alseids 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 slavering 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 fewer 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—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 gorged 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 can still fit it in. 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. “*Ohhhhhh*, 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 catch any more prey, but tonight was different. Her prey couldn't run—it was too sluggish 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, gorged 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 so *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 waddled over to one of the few remaining alseids. Snatching her up—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 *stuffed.*”

“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 pumpkin.”

“*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 beginning of the digestive process, but the alseids—at least the ones eaten that night—were all alive and unharmed.

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

"You saved us!" Kekepania sniveled, snot 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 short and dingy mop. "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 go on a diet!”

“I think that's a great idea,” Ulyssa said. She turned to Astra with a sickly sweet smile. “Oh, don't worry, Astra. We know you refuse to be punished, so 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.