

## THE GLEN OF THE ALSEIDS-Part 1

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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 say 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? Also 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 mistaken 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 even 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 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 wasn't that the same thing?

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

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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 alone 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 side 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, crumbles of mushroom and fat, heavy tears falling 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 was coming 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 elseid 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 tales. 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 suddenly 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.*

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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 relief herself before seeking out the others.

They gathered in the center of the glen for a headcount, with elseids 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 elseid 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 lowered with each slow, slumbering breath.

“It's a wonder she doesn't bring the whole bridge down on herself, snorting 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 uselessly to the ground, thudding into the wet sand.

“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 farther.

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 watermelon 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 juice-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...”

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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 to 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!* She'd enjoyed both of them, 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 is 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.