

Nymphs of Theros

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From set *Theros*

Awaking into being, she experienced such sadness swelling in her core. Overcome with the grief of a life lost—no, many lives lost—and the spirits within the massive hydra forever extinguished, was the first of many feelings this youthful nymph would become familiar with. Arising from the grass beneath the spilled blood, Zoe stood and immediately fell to her knees to press her leafy forehead to one of the hydra's fallen heads. Her starlit hands caressed the front horn of the creature and she sang in a sad, low voice her first words in Theros. A blade had slain this majestic creature and it hurt Zoe, who was connected to all the souls of the forest. A servant of Nylea, Zoe wanted to protect the rest of her beloved beasts from the tragedy that had just occurred.

The sun set and a new day began before she stood again and took her first steps. Zoe followed a lynx into a grove of pale green olive trees and immediately understood that the grove was her home. Once inside, Zoe felt the presence of her creator. Thinking of the hydra's stillness and the dryness in her eyes, Zoe asked, "What is this sorrow? What is this world and why is it so cruel as to murder a living creature of greatness?"

Nylea spoke in a voice that sang like honey, "Mortals do not understand the beauty of the woods. We must protect our animals and our home from the folly and hatred of the humans."

"How can I protect the beauty, Master?"

"You were created in a spout of grief and I trust that, feeling that grief, you will be inspired to preserve the vitality of our home and do so in your own way, when the time comes. For now, dance with your sisters among the trees in the starlight from my home."

With that, the presence of Nylea disappeared and the sound of laughter filled the grove. Dryads appeared from the trees as though they'd been pressed against the trunks, drinking energy from the roots—energy that would keep the dryads dancing and singing until the sunlight appeared again.

"New sister, play with us!" A dryad grabbed Zoe's hand, her leaves so long Zoe couldn't tell where her hair stopped and the branches of the trees above started. Her arms were long and graceful, and she led Zoe to a circle of joyous dryads encircling an oak tree and celebrating the sweet earth below. Her face was exquisite with soft features and large eyes, and her grin was loving and cheerful. The grief Zoe felt melted away. She felt warm and energized. She found dancing was as natural as breathing.



Leafcrown Dryad | Art by Volkan Baga

Zoe learned of many nymphs like herself aligned with gods other than her own. She was referred to as a Euphoran, considered the hands of Nylea and capable of traveling on purposeful quests. Euphoran nymphs, she was told, unlike their sisters, are created unintentionally as a side effect of a god's spell, and embody the ideals they were born from. Because of this, Zoe had the purpose of protecting her wood, and thus needed to better understand the dangers that existed.

Zoe's sisters looked to her for guidance in times of danger, such as when hunters pass through their grove. Not wanting to shed blood of any creature, Zoe often scared away intruders by shaking trees or singing haunting chords. She acted as somewhat of a caretaker, singing her sisters to sleep and watching over them. In the mornings, she strode with the deer, and at night, she caressed the cooing owls.

One evening, surveying the woods outside the grove, Zoe witnessed a hunter's death. She had been following him to ensure he would leave with no kill, when an arrow pierced his heart and he dropped. The death frightened Zoe, but when she noticed a hooded figure saunter up to the body, she realized another human had caused it. The thought of a being assaulting another its own sickened Zoe. *How could one slaughter its own kind?* While contemplating this, the murderer knelt to retrieve her arrow from the body, but two fiery figures appeared and consumed her instantaneously. The figures were of a similar build as Zoe, with starry shadows and soft, feminine faces. But instead of leaves and branches, they were covered in a bright, burning light—resembling fire, but solid.



Spearpoint Oread | Art by Todd Lockwood

Zoe approached the nymphs and they turned toward her, startled yet ready for battle. She put up a peaceful hand and said, “I do not want to cause your souls any harm. Please, why did you kill?”

One of these nymphs spoke, “Blood guilt cannot be forgiven. Three mortal souls this thief stole. No more blood will be shed. My sister was merely assisting in case we were spotted.”

“So, you were protecting more mortals from this one human?”

“For blood payment. Bloodshed should only be done honorably in battle. This thief was not honorable, so she had to pay.”

Zoe didn’t understand how any bloodshed could be honorable. Her grief returned momentarily, but she wanted to know more about these new beings and her curiosity grew stronger. “Why do humans kill?”

“Power. They want to control others to be... leaders. As we lead our sisters. They want to do that.”

“That isn’t bad, though. How would killing help?”

The red nymph lowered her brow in thought and said, “Other humans want to lead, too. Humans battle to decide who can lead. In battle, weak souls die honorably. Sometimes, humans try to lead outside of battle. This human wanted currency, a way to purchase items that can help with power. She was willing to kill for currency. This is dishonorable—worth punishment.”

“Where do you dwell?” Zoe tried to imagine a red nymph’s home.

“Up high in mountain tops, closer to our master Purphoros.”

Zoe could picture the beautiful bodies resting on rocks against the sky, their color similar to her companions’ leaves in the autumn. She wondered how trees in the mountains stood.

The red nymph watched Zoe and said, “You seem to be like me; capable of thought and free will.”

“That’s because we are Euphoran nymphs. Created out of emotion during our god’s spell, not as a mere servant.”

“Yes. There are only a handful of us. We all have different goals and rarely cross paths.”

The idea of others inspired Zoe, but these others with ideals so different from her own—could they harm her forest? Might they murder a cougar for eating a mouse? Would that be dishonorable? The thought of them taking “payment” from her creatures scared Zoe and a coolness ran through her that ended in a shiver. “Be gone, Oread Sisters. Leave our forest be. I fear the damage flames could do in my home.”

“We can leave your woods at once, Dryad. Our business here is done.”

The encounter spread wonder into Zoe’s mind, of what else was on the edge of her woods, of who could cause harm to her creatures and her roots. She must know. Perhaps, she thought, other Euphorans could teach her of the dangers. And she wanted to meet them, to see beings like herself. Receiving guidance from the Euphorans who had traveled more than her could lead to fulfilling her purpose of protecting the woods more satisfactorily.

Her first journey led her to where woods end and meadow begin. The sunlight hurt Zoe’s eyes and she crawled across the hot ground beneath the burning sun for half a day before finding brush to drink the energy of shade from. Zoe could feel a dampness nearby and saw green blades of grass ahead. There were little white puffs bobbing on the hills and Zoe could feel the spirits within the beasts, but had never met the kind before.

“Please don’t touch my creatures,” she heard a voice say. A nymph scurried to her, resembling the red ones Zoe had met, only gentler in shape and demeanor. Her head was covered in wheat stalks and her skin was as light as the sun. “I think its best you stay in your deep world and I protect my fields.”



Observant Alseid | Art by Todd Lockwood

“What do you fear will harm your fields?” asked Zoe, standing up, eye to eye, with the white nymph.

“Warriors have massacred my flocks before, stolen their wool, taken their hide, and eaten their meat.”

Sadness flooded within Zoe at the thought of beasts being shredded in that way, and she could relate.

“Humans do not care for the less-intelligent kind. They see no harm in destroying life below them, as they believe to be superior, much like Heliod is my superior.”

“You are a Euphoran,” noticed Zoe.

The nymph nodded with a bright grin, but shooed Zoe away like a shepherd leads a flock, almost playfully. Zoe understood that this nymph, like her, just wanted to protect her home. It seemed to Zoe that all of nature was harmed by humans.

Once back deep into the woods, Zoe drank from a stream; she wanted to see how far it stretched and fed the trees in her woods, to ensure that her beloved home would have all it would ever need in dry spells or hot times. She also felt there might be a Euphoran of the water itself, who might have insight as well—for dangers lurk in the water’s depths, too.

Zoe journeyed away from the grove for a couple days before she happened upon a cliff. Her woods ended suddenly, making her heart bounce with an anxiety she’d never experienced. Ahead was a lake—a large body of her vital water. She no longer feared its depletion, but she wondered what else was inside.

It wasn’t long before a splash ahead caught Zoe’s eye. Was that a creature? Meandering closer, Zoe saw another being like herself, with a similar face like that of a human maiden. But instead of lush leaves, this nymph rippled like waves, as though she were carved out of the liquid Zoe’s forest needed to live. The naiad at first waved with a webbed hand, but then dived into the watery hole and didn’t return for quite some time.



Nimbus Naiad | Art by David Palumbo

Zoe, too curious to leave just then, sat near the edge of the cliff and watched the figure making circles beneath the surface. It danced underneath the waves, much like Zoe danced beneath the trees. The blue

face looked up, smiled playfully, and flew out of the water up to where Zoe sat, where she hovered, her flowing arms outstretched and her starry shadows moving against the blue sky.

“Our homes touch, but we cannot play together,” said the nymph. “I must keep my underwater friends safe from your beasts, you see. Please go back. Please return to your dry home.”

“Wait... while I do miss my sisters, I must admit that your depths look dangerous to me. Can you teach me of the peril within?”

Wading in the air, the naiad pondered. “Krakens linger down below, and sharks, eels, and more and more. Yet something horrible floats above my waves, forever causing gore.”

Zoe felt fear of the unknown, but played the riddle game with the naiad. “Does it fly? Does it soar?”

“It does not soar, it does not fly, it creates devices from your home up high. Uses those to torture my creatures below, killing, stealing, I’m sad, but it’s so.”

“No,” whispered Zoe. “Humans.”

“Yes, yes, the mortals that stand on two legs made of flesh and bone; they do not care for any but their very own.” The naiad knelt down, spun, and submerged again into her cool home.

Zoe shivered slightly before going back into the safety of her trees. The new feeling of hopelessness created a tunnel into Zoe’s heart. An empty tunnel that didn’t hold love like she felt for the rest of the animals she had met. Humans were the one creature Zoe didn’t seem to understand. Perhaps one more Euphoran could answer her. One she heard lived near herself, but one that she’d heard wanted to be left alone.

Zoe risked travel into the darkest parts of her forest. The areas where shadows seemed to crawl and trees seemed more dead than alive. Eventually, she reached a deep, dark cave. Inside, stars appeared.

“Stay away,” cried a voice.

Squinting, Zoe could make out a dark figure, thin like herself and glowing of stars. This face was not playful or loving like other nymphs—just as beautiful, but sad. This face, surrounded by darkness, knew grief like Zoe had experienced on her first day of existence.

Quietly, hauntingly, the nymph spoke. “I’m waiting for a death. Do not disturb me.”

As Zoe crept nearer to the sound, she saw a hunter across the stream, bow pulled, and a resting wolf in sight.

“No!” shouted Zoe. The human turned and the two of them made eye contact. Without thinking, Zoe began to sing a charming song that caught the man’s attention.

“A dryad,” he whispered. “A beautiful creature.” He dropped his bow. “Come to me,” he pled. The human made his way toward Zoe slowly, arms reaching out.

Zoe turned and ran but heard a loud splash. Making her way back to the sound, she saw the human figure sprawled out, drown in the stream. She didn’t feel grief, but pride, in having saved the wolf’s life.

Zoe watched as the dark nymph of before approached the motionless body. The solemn nymph swayed above the body, arms reaching and pulling rhythmically as she howled a somber tune. She encircled the body as her hands drew up what looked like white smoke. Once the mist was wrapped up in the lampad’s starry hands, her enchanting dance stopped. Slowly, the nymph disappeared into the cave, from which Zoe saw neither lampad nor human soul return.



Cavern Lampad | Art by Volkan Baga

After the silence from the disturbance died and the sound of birds chirping was restored, Zoe too returned to her path home. A morning later, Zoe was back in her olive grove. Her sisters greeted her with open arms and they danced with the trees while she sang a song of her journey.