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NYMPHS

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NYMPHS

Nymphs are magical creatures bound to the land as guardians. Although they began their lives as elves, as the ages roll on, many nymphs lose themselves to the lands they are bound to, becoming more and more elemental.

PEAR-IMMORTAL GUARDIANS BOUND BY SERVICE

We're going to present one likely story of the nymph's origins, while hinting at others. Even if you decide that our detailed story is not the final truth in your campaign, it at least makes a compelling secret that could motivate many iconic plots.

DAINGEROUS SECRETS

The player characters may or may not know the story of the Elf Queen's creation of the original Orc Lord, part of the icons' all-out effort to destroy and replace the Wizard King.

The most likely story behind the creation of the nymphs involves similar dangerous rituals. The Elf Queen of ages past (or whoever wore the crown as the monarch of elvenkind) had many such powerful secrets, rituals, and artifacts and processes that seemed too dangerous to preserve intact and too powerful to be entirely destroyed.

To hide these magics, and erase their memories, the elves splintered the magic into hundreds or thousands of pieces and secreted them through the world, assigning each splintered piece a guardian. The guardians were volunteers (supposedly!), elves who gave up their normal lives to become magically transformed guardians of fragments of secrets they were glad not to comprehend.

The Elf Queen and others at her Court acknowledged such unselfish sacrifice by bestowing power upon these elves, extending their lifespan through rituals that blended elven lifeforce with elemental energy drawn from the site where the magic would be stored. The elf was tasked to guard the site for all time, or until an unspecified time in the future when service was no longer required. The elves called these immortal guardians nymphaea. Except among the pretentious or pedantic, it's been shortened to "nymph."

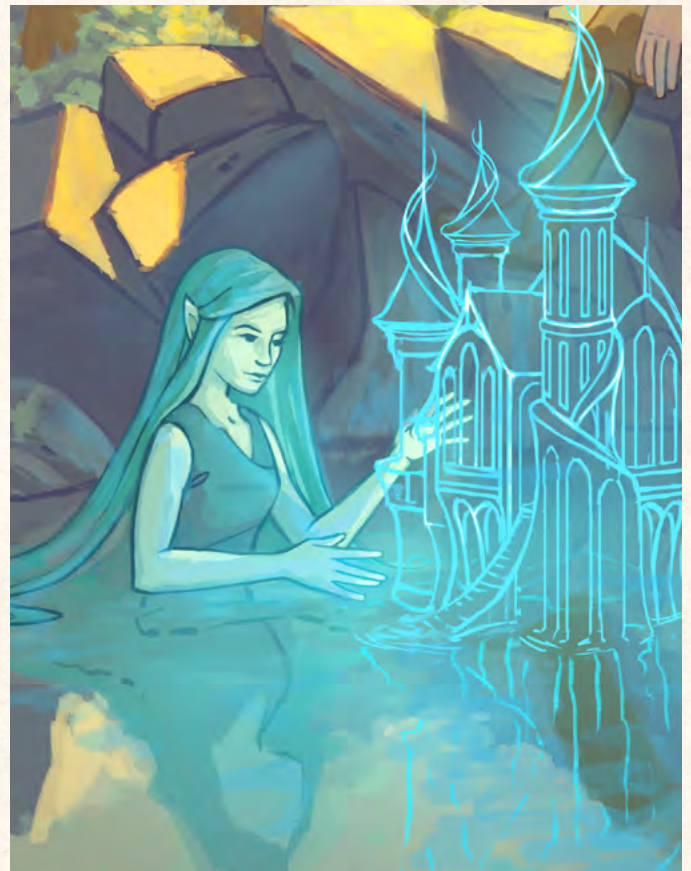
Elves who became nymphs were transformed by the process, becoming something more than mortal as their life energy mixed with the land. Each nymph becomes acutely aware of its domain, whether lake, grotto, river, wood, hill, or mountain. The attunement is so strong it could feel the river's anger or the forest's pain when someone despoils the land nearby. Each also begins to take on characteristics of the land it guards, becoming tree-like, or river-like, or hill-like. One cost of their service and transformation, however, is being limited to the region where they were bound to the land, never able to experience the wider world.

As ages pass, most nymphs loses more of their original identity as their attunement to the land they guard increases.

Many still remember themselves and their purpose, though their outlook upon the world will have shifted. A few, especially those who have suffered side-effects from the magic they were set to guard, have degraded further. Damaged nymphs may barely remember their purpose, or may have become confused and seek to destroy any who enter their domain rather than simply protect that which was hidden away.

Whether they remember their duty or not, one other side effect of the nymph's sacrifice usually holds true—it's probably a lonely existence. Becoming a nymph removes an elf from the shared dreams of its kin and the Elf Queen, and the nymph's forced isolation takes a toll, even on creatures capable of losing themselves within the land for centuries. For these reasons, they often seek news of the wider world from those who pass by, as well as the company of others. Stories about nymphs and other fey creatures taking mortals captive could be based on interactions with nymphs who lose track of time.

More social nymphs: A few more stable implementations of the nymph rituals established several nymphs in close proximity to each other. Domains that overlap slightly may protect areas that have intrinsic value as well as holding magical secrets. The cover of this issue shows such an arrangement, a quiet moment when a river nymph is constructing an image of the castle whose ruins the hill nymph is both bound to and sitting upon. What the wild dryad in the background thinks, we can't be sure.



Where's the loot? Nymphs may be guardians, but you'll have noticed that we're not suggesting that the GM needs to create magic, treasure, and artifacts for the nymphs to be guarding. Obvious treasure locations tend to get looted, which is why there are so many thoroughly-raided tombs. The version of the story we're focused on suggests that the magic which nymphs are guarding is so subtle that most people, and even most would-be adventuresome looters, have never noticed it's there. You can fight off a nymph, search its domain, fight it off again, and eventually destroy the area and you're probably still not getting any actual loot out of it. The secret? Well, that may have been released (see below). But the sum of all those released secrets could be more of a campaign plotline event than a lootable moment.

Of course, if you want to make nymph land prime looting-grounds, you can do that. Stocking nymph domains with actual treasures suggests that the creation of the nymphs may have been quite recent instead of ancient.

To release a secret: PCs could probably release a nymph's secret magic by slaying (temporarily!) the nymph and then performing a powerful ritual or using an icon relationship advantage. NPCs are probably stuck attempting a powerful ritual. Alternatively, destroying the area entirely or laying waste to everything that gives it its identity might also work, but doing so may also earn you new enemies.

If you'd like the secret to have an element of a game effect, while encouraging player input in the campaign, you could treat part of each secret as a powerful icon relationship advantage. It might be with the Elf Queen. Or perhaps not . . .

A shell game: Maybe there aren't actually magical secrets attached to all the lands the nymphs are guarding. Perhaps most of the nymphs are decoys, meant to give the Elf Queen time to respond if anyone makes a serious effort to plunder the domains of her guardians. How would nymphs react if they learned that they were decoys? Would that vary by individual or would there be a common response? Would nymphs who truly guard magical secrets now differ from the rest, or would that be too obvious a giveaway?

Penance, not volunteerism: What if not all nymphs were volunteers? What if some were serving sentences? If those sentences were magically enforced, might these nymphs be freed from their duties after a lengthy servitude? Thirteen ages seems about right!

What happens to their secrets or the magic they've been guarding in this case? Perhaps some of the nymphs in your campaign aren't as bound to a location as we're assuming: they've done their time, but stayed on with land they've come to love. But they may not act predictably or with any fondness for the icons and magicians who you'd expect them to get along with.

For another possibility, see the Orc Lord as a Former Secret paragraph on the next page.

GUARDIANS OF WOOD, WATER, AND STONE

Over time, each nymph takes on the appearance of the land where it resides. Nymphs in a forest (dryad) become tree-like. Nymphs guarding a river, stream, or pond (naiad) take on the appearance of running water or river stones as they let the currents wash over them. Nymphs protecting a hilltop ruin or a mountain cave (oread) become still and stone-like, sunbaked and weathered by wind and rain. Nymphs guarding a sea grotto (nereid) take on the appearance of seaweed, sand, or sea creatures that glide on the water's currents.

Nymphs spend the long hours of the ages shifting between more-or-less-elven and elemental forms. Those who remember themselves and their duty can always choose elven form (though often with elemental or natural characteristics like water flesh, bark hair, or stony flesh). They usually take humanoid form to converse with humanoids passing through their domain to get news of the wider world.

Nymphs in humanoid form may be female or male, androgynous or none of the above. Eventually, the oldest or most wild nymphs can no longer remember themselves or their original form, and shift more and more into elemental shapes.

No matter how little of their original selves nymphs remember, one truth almost always holds. Nymphs will protect the magic they were originally tasked with guarding, whether directly through force, or by misdirection and lies. If their charge is removed from their domain, the nymph's bonds to the land are destroyed.

What happens then? That could be up to you. Is it more interesting for a failed guardian to disappear, or to be charged with regaining their secret?

NYMPHS AND THE ICONS

Initially, nymphs were linked to the Elf Queen. An earlier Elf Queen and that age's equivalent of the Court of Stars used significant amounts of power to create nymphs, forging strong bonds to last for centuries.

Nymphs who remember themselves will always help the Elf Queen and elves in need as long as that help doesn't interfere with their ability to guard their magic. They may help other folk, if it suits them, but a nymph's view of the world is alien to most PCs. Not only do they hold a measure of power from the Elf Queen and her Court and thus share the sensibilities of those elder beings, but their near-immortal lifespans and connection to the land also gives them a long-term worldview, so their actions can seem strange to short-term thinking PCs.



The process of creating nymphs had an effect the Elf Queen didn't expect, however. Because a nymph's lifeforce is bound to the land it guards, many of the oldest nymphs are losing their sense of "elfness" and becoming more elemental in nature. As this happens, they become wild and are more likely to attack those entering their domain without provocation, or they follow their whims and collect a humanoid or two who piques their interest.

As a nymph goes wild, its allegiances shift toward the High Druid and her followers, who can now connect with the creatures on an elemental level. Sometimes wild nymphs lose humanoid speech, and can only converse using the voices of water and wind. A wild dryad's trees might grow angry and attack PCs who aren't listening to it, or a naiad might cause a sudden flood of a small river as the PCs cross because they are ignoring its warnings (which sound like river stones clinking to the characters).

As the nymphs' relationships change from Elf Queen to High Druid, they might or might not reveal some secrets to their new master. It's possible that each secret revealed sends power from the Elf Queen to the High Druid. Alternatively, the burden of holding these secrets could be shifting from the Elf Queen to the High Druid. If you feel like adding high-magic complications to your campaign, the specific nature of the dark magic kept hidden by the network of nymphs could become a fracture point between the icons.

Other icons: If you decide that you want the secrets that nymphs guard to connect with other icons, you could bend long-lived nymphs away from the land and toward other icons. If the magic goes wrong, Orc Lord-related secrets might turn the region into a spawning pit. Archmage-related secrets could end up interrupting the great wards. Secrets related to the ancient Wizard King could accomplish all sorts of mischief.

Orc Lord as a former secret: Thirteen ages is a long time for a secret to be kept hidden. What if the forces that came together to create the Orc Lord got loose as the result of the death or dissolution of a large number of nymphs? If you're having fun with the concept that the nymph-network is loaded with dangerous secrets, this seems worth hinting at! If the Orc Lord is now loose because something happened to too-many-nymphs, does that mean the Orc Lord has uniquely evil intentions toward the surviving nymphs? Is the Elf Queen going to recruit heroes like the adventurers to visit nymphs, gain their magical power in some possibly peaceful way, and bring it back to the Elf Queen? So many things could go wrong.



Using ΠΥΜΠΗΣ AS PRCs

While nymphs can be dangerous foes, especially to those trying to take the magic they guard, many still remember themselves. Nymphs that have strong connections with the Elf Queen and that haven't gone fully wild could be allies. They are knowledgeable about the region, and might be competent historians within a limited scope unless they've begun going wild.

Locals might have stories about a nymph in the area, ranging from helpful to dangerous. Some have been given titles, such as Lorekeeper, Old Man Tree, the Pool's Delight, the Talking Mound, Ancient One, the Sea Daughter, and more.

On the other hand, nymphs that remember themselves may have unusual agendas. That could be particularly true if the nymph has somehow grown bitter about its situation, or if it has been turned by an icon other than the Elf Queen or High Druid.

NYMPH POWERS

The following powers are common for nymphs.

Domain bound: Nymphs are tied to an area of land or water. Land areas will be at most a couple miles wide; water areas might be much larger. As a rule, nymphs can't leave the area they're bound to.

Limited immortality: A nymph that drops to 0 hit points or is otherwise slain will eventually return to life in its domain, so long as its domain and its secret survives. After an hour, a nymph needs a hard save to return to life. After eight hours, a nymph needs a normal save to return to life. If the nymph has still not returned, roll an easy save at the end of each 24 hours until the nymph succeeds.

Note on types: The following nymphs with the humanoid type probably remember themselves. Nymphs that have probably forgotten their original selves have the elemental type.

WOOD ΠΥΜΦΗ (DRYAD)

Maybe there were always wood elves who longed to truly become creatures of bark and branch. Or maybe the magic was just easier that way.

Double-strength 2nd level spoiler [HUMANOID]

Initiative: +6

Vulnerability: fire

Sharp wooden fingers +7 vs. AC—12 damage

R: Spiked acorn +6 vs. AC—11 damage

C: Willowy words +7 vs. MD (1d2 nearby enemies)—The target is confused (save ends)

Natural 16+: The save is hard (16+) instead.

Environmental boost: The dryad gains a +4 bonus to the attack against targets that have consumed natural food or water within the dryad's domain within the last day.

Tree stride: As a move action, a dryad can enter any living tree within its domain it's touching and teleport to another tree within that region. This movement doesn't provoke opportunity attacks.

Nastier Specials

Call tree friends: Before the start of the battle, the dryad summons 2d4 awakened trees (*13 True Ways*, page 202) that fight with it.

Entrancing beauty: The dryad can appear as a beautiful wood elf. While speaking with creatures outside of battle, the dryad can choose to add power to its words to try to charm those listening. Make a *willowy words* attack against each creature that can hear the dryad. On a hit, instead of being confused, the target is charmed (as per the *charm person* spell). It then considers the dryad a friend. Creatures missed by the attack only notice the charm attempt if it misses by 4 or more. A dryad can attempt to charm a creature only once per day.

Woodland grace: The dryad can take an extra standard action during its turn when the escalation die is even.

AC 18
PD 15 HP 76
MD 13

WILD DRYAD

The grower the dryad, the treer he thinks.

Double-strength 3rd level wrecker [ELEMENTAL]

Initiative: +8

Vulnerability: fire

Branching clubs and flailing branches +8 vs. AC (1d4 attacks)—15 damage

C: Unexpected natural hazards +8 vs. PD (1d3 nearby enemies)—24 damage (representing things like bees erupting from underground hives, branches falling from other trees, cave-ins, and whatever else seems available in nature's arsenal)

Limited use: 1/battle.

Environmental boost: The dryad gains a +4 bonus to attacks against targets that have consumed natural food or water within the dryad's domain within the last day.

Tree stride: As a move action, a dryad can enter any living tree within its domain it's touching and teleport to another tree within that region. This movement doesn't provoke opportunity attacks.

Nastier Specials

Call tree friends: Before the start of the battle, the dryad summons 2d4 awakened trees (*13 True Ways*, page 202) that fight with it.

Woodland grace: The dryad can take an extra standard action during its turn when the escalation die is even.

AC 19
PD 17 HP 100
MD 15

RIVER ΠΥΜΦΗ (ΝΑΙΑΔ)

"I have remembered what is important. Have you?"

Double-strength 3rd level spoiler [HUMANOID]

Initiative: +9

Fist of water +8 vs. AC—17 damage, and the target pops free from the naiad

R: Skipped river stone +7 vs. AC—12 damage

Natural even hit or miss: The attack targets another nearby enemy unless it's already targeted three enemies this way.

C: Watery words +8 vs. MD (one nearby enemy)—The target is confused (save ends; see *the river's song* below)

The river's song: When a creature is confused from the naiad's *watery words* attack, it immediately moves into the water next to the naiad as a free action to defend the naiad. The target takes half the damage of the next attack that hits the naiad. During its turn, it doesn't attack, instead moving to stay next to the naiad. Each time the target fails its save, it will again defend the naiad against the next attack that hits it, taking half damage.

One with the river: A naiad can walk on the surface of water, making it seem shallow, and it can swim through the water and breathe underwater with ease. Its enemies might have a more difficult time engaging it.

Nastier Specials

Naiad's cleansing: Each time a target confused by *watery words* fails its save, it will forget something important. GM's choice or player's suggestion!

AC 18
PD 18 HP 80
MD 14

WILD NAIAD

Careening water in what was calm, a wave that shows a face for a moment before it hits.

Double-strength 5th level spoiler [ELEMENTAL]

Initiative: +11

Fist of water +10 vs. AC—32 damage, and the target pops free from the naiad

R: Skipped river stone +9 vs. AC—20 damage

Natural even hit or miss: The attack targets another nearby enemy unless it's already targeted three enemies this way.

C: Watery words +10 vs. MD (one nearby enemy)—The target is confused (save ends; see *the river's song* below)

The river's song: When a creature is confused from the naiad's *watery words* attack, it immediately moves into the water next to the naiad as a free action to defend the naiad. The target takes half the damage of the next attack that hits the naiad. During its turn, it doesn't attack, instead moving to stay next to the naiad. Each time the target fails its save, it will again defend the naiad against the next attack that hits it, taking half damage.

One with the river: A naiad can walk on the surface of water, making it seem shallow, and it can swim through the water and breathe underwater with ease. Its enemies might have a more difficult time engaging it.

Nastier Specials

Naiad's cleansing: Each time a target confused by *watery words* fails its save, it will forget something important. GM's choice or player's suggestion!

AC 20
PD 20 HP 130
MD 16

HILL ΠΥΜΠΗ (OREAD)

The elf lad sitting on the toppled column at the peak of the hill watches you approach. "You're not allowed here," he says slowly. Then his flesh turns as cold and hard as the marble column he's sitting on.

Double-strength 4th level spoiler [HUMANOID]

Initiative: +6

Vulnerability: thunder

Hardened fist +9 vs. AC—25 damage

Natural 14+: The target is stuck until the end of its next turn as a stone hand rises from the ground to grasp it.

Natural 18+: As above, but save ends.

C: Hard words +9 vs. MD (1d3 nearby enemies)—20 psychic damage, and the target is overcome by the cold beauty and piercing words of the oread (save ends); while overcome, the target takes a penalty to all defenses equal to the escalation die *Natural 16+:* The target also takes the penalty to attacks.

Miss: 10 psychic damage.

Limited use: 1/battle.

Earth's embrace: Once per battle as a move action, the oread can pull one creature currently overcome by its *hard words* attack under the ground into an embrace with a part of its consciousness. The oread's physical form remains above ground and continues to battle. The target remains underground, taking no actions except to bond with the oread and telepathically reveal its secrets to the oread until it saves. While underground, it can't be seen or targeted by allies. Saving from being overcome releases the target from underground.

Nastier Specials

Resist weapon damage 12+: When a weapon attack targets this creature, the attacker must roll a natural 12+ on the attack roll or it only deals half damage.

AC 21
PD 17 HP 100
MD 12

WILD OREAD

The party druid may be able to talk you out of this fight. No druid? Fight.

Double-strength 6th level spoiler [ELEMENTAL]

Initiative: +8

Vulnerability: thunder

Hardened fist +11 vs. AC—38 damage

Natural 14+: The target is stuck until the end of its next turn as a stone hand rises from the ground to grasp it.

Natural 18+: As above, but save ends.

Stoneflow: As a move action once per round, the oread can sink into the ground and emerge somewhere nearby. This movement doesn't provoke opportunity attacks.

Nastier Specials

Resist weapon damage 14+: When a weapon attack targets this creature, the attacker must roll a natural 14+ on the attack roll or it only deals half damage.

AC 23
PD 19 HP 170
MD 14



SEA ΠΥΜΠΗ (PEREID)

Perhaps because they are some of the oldest nymphs, or perhaps because of the magic the First Emperor used to tame the Midland Sea, sea nymphs are most likely to have forgotten themselves. Thus, they are also the most likely to immediately attack PCs who wander into their domain instead of first talking to them.

Double-strength 5th level spoiler [HUMANOID]

Initiative: +8

Vulnerability: fire

Coral claws +10 vs. AC (2 attacks)—16 damage

C: Rippling words +9 vs. MD (up to 2 nearby enemies)—The target falls unconscious as it begins to slumber (save ends; an ally next to the target can also use a standard action to wake the target)

Limited use: When the escalation die is odd.

Call of the sea: Twice per battle as a quick action (once per round), the nereid can call to a slumbering creature, and during its next turn (while still unconscious), that creature will swim under the water seeking the nereid. The creature must start making last gasp saves, which replace its save against being unconscious. After the fourth failure, it drowns.

Child of the sea: The nereid can walk atop the waves and move (and breathe) underwater without restraint. Its enemies might have a more difficult time engaging it.

AC 20

PD 20

MD 16

HP 135

WILD PEREID

Not likely to be found in the Midland Sea. But around elven ruins swamped by the Iron Sea, like the Grey Towers? Oh yes.

Double-strength 7th level spoiler [ELEMENTAL]

Initiative: +10

Vulnerability: fire

Coral claws +12 vs. AC (2 attacks)—25 damage

R: Rising wave +12 vs. PD (1d3 nearby enemies in a group)—24 damage, and the target loses its next move action

Escalation die is 3+: The attack targets 1d3 + 1 nearby enemies in a group instead.

Child of the sea: The nereid can walk atop the waves and move (and breathe) underwater without restraint. Its enemies might have a more difficult time engaging it.

AC 22

PD 22

MD 18

HP 200