

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“Where have you been!?” she demanded.

He retorted, “Dancing with the other nymphs, of course.”

“*Of course*. Really, now?”

“I was at the temple. The elders say you may take the trial.”

Tarl watched his partner’s wisp of a smile grow to a wide grin.

“Really!? That’s great! You were so sure they weren’t going to give me a chance!”

“Yeah, I was, wasn’t I?”

Elyse’s smile contorted to concern, and Tarl looked away, back towards the temple.

She asked, “What? What is it?”

“Nothing. I’m just worried is all.”

“Hey now, I’ll be fine! So long as I don’t catch you dancing with those *other* nymphs.”

Tarl managed a chuckle and then nodded. She stared then pressed him for more.

“When?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

“Wow, that’s fast!”

“It’s not like there’s a line, Elyse.”

“Better not! I found you first!”

Elyse ribbed Tarl in his side and he sat back on his haunches, smiling. The young nymph tossed her arms around him and coated his face in kisses. Her wispy hair smelled faintly of cherry blossoms.

“I know the perfect tree to pass the evening under...” she murmured.

“Do you now?”

Tarl stood and allowed the nymph to mount his back. He lightly whipped his feline tail across her leg then began to trot towards the woods. She rested her chin atop his shoulder as he carried her to their favorite spot. Stars twinkled overhead as they traveled.

“You seem tense.”

“Aye, because I am.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. I’m just worried is all.”

“But why? Do you think I won’t make it?”

“Do you love me?”

“Of course I do! What kind of question is that!?”

“Then you’ll be fine.”

“Except you’re still worrying. You still haven’t told me what the trial even is!”

“Aye, because I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

"I don't know, Elyse. Every trial is unique."

"Natal got through ok, right?"

"Aye."

"Emeris did fine."

"Aye, she did."

"So...?"

"They weren't nymphs."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"They were taurs, too."

"So?"

"So, I'm worried! I've never heard of a nymph passing the trial."

"You'd rather just run off, still?"

"Is it so important that you do it?"

"Tarl, we've been over this..."

"Aye, but really? I love you as you are and..."

"You said you wanted a family."

Tarl stopped before a spindly cherry blossom tree and sighed. Elyse did not get down from his back. She gently stroked the nape of his neck before sighing.

"You still do, right?" she whispered.

"Aye, I want a family, Elyse" he mumbled.

"Do you want it with me, or..."

"Don't."

"You're the one who seems uncertain, Tarl. Not me."

"I don't want you to get hurt, that's all."

"It's a trial of love, Tarl, not combat!"

"Aye, but still. What if, what if they say no?"

"Then we cross that stream when we get to it, together."

"Aye, I couldn't do it alone."

"Of course not! That's why you picked me!"

Tarl chuckled and sat, forcing his partner to stand on her own. Elyse giggled and sauntered over to the base of the tree. She touched it, and its wood seemed to groan and splinter.

"Don't be like that..." she cooed to the tree.

"At least I'm not the only one worrying."

"Stop it, Tarl. She's just lonely is all."

"Aye, oaks might be smart, but they don't talk much."

"Did you just say I talk too much?"

"No!"

Elyse narrowed her eyes, but her smile remained as she stared at the pantaur with mock suspicion. Tarl shook his head and then grinned.

"Oh, it smiles, too! Oh my, I think I'm in love!"

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“Funny.”

“Come here and sit.”

“I’m not a dog” he retorted.

“Pspspsp!” she taunted.

Tarl scowled at Elyse and the nymph guffawed at him. She slid down the trunk of the spindly tree and then lay on her side. Propping her head on one arm, she beckoned him over with a dainty finger.

“Come here, Tarl.”

A small shiver ran down his spine as he stood. His tail flicked twice as he drew near to lie down beside her. Elyse draped her arms over his shoulders as he lay back, her hair covering his face. He gazed up into grey eyes.

“I’m going to be ok” she whispered gently.

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Nobody else is like you.”

“No other nymph, you mean.”

“No, nobody in the world is like you.”

“Mmm. Nobody is like you, Tarl.”

She rested her chin on his forehead, and he breathed in her sweet scent. He tried to calm down, but his fear continued to return. The elder’s words kept echoing in his mind.

“What are you worrying about now?” she asked with a light giggle.

“How can you tell?”

“It’s like a drum.”

Elyse tapped her fingers on his chest.

“Sorry.”

“What is it?”

“The same.”

“Tarl...”

“I’m sorry! Ok?”

“Hey, hey! Ok! I’m just trying to relax you.”

“Aye, well, it’s not working.”

“I can see that.”

“Sorry.”

“Look, I don’t want you to worry but you have to tell me what to do, you know?”

“Aye, I know.”

“Well?”

“Right now?”

“It’s tomorrow, *right?*”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

Tarl sighed and sat up, then pulled his paws beneath his frame. Folding his arms, he looked at the ground, the boughs above, the woods, and finally at her. The nymph sat cross-legged now; her own arms folded. Tarl studied his partner in silence. Any other nymph would have held her arms too tight beneath her bosom. She would have asked him five questions by now, too. Three of them would have been some variation of if he thought she was beautiful.

“We are to meet them at sunset, at the temple. Don’t bring anything with you. No charms or trinkets or hair braids or anything like that.”

Elyse raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Tarl looked away then shrugged.

“They start the trial there and, when it’s over, you either are accepted or you’re not.”

A long silence followed before Elyse spoke.

“So...what do I do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Seems a bit unfair” she mumbled.

“They don’t take this sort of thing lightly, Elyse.”

“I know that. Just seems odd. Have you asked anyone?”

“I was told not to.”

“So?”

“Elyse, I’m not going to blow this.”

“And yet you’re very worried I will!”

“I am not!”

“*Really.*”

“Elyse, I just...what? You think I’m ok not knowing?”

“No, but you usually *do* know!”

“Well, I don’t! Not this time.”

Tarl huffed and looked down at his paws. He heard her sigh and felt a pang of guilt. He looked back at her and forced a smile. His heart quickened when she winked.

“I’m sorry. I’m worrying too much. I didn’t mean...”

“I’m scared, too, Tarl. Rishi said I’d do fine if given the chance.”

“Aye, she would. And the elders *are* giving you that chance.”

“What else did they say?”

“Nothing.”

Tarl’s blank expression didn’t fool her. Elyse breathed deeply, let out a long sigh, and then raised an eyebrow. She set a hand to her hip and tossed her hair with a wry smile.

“Really?” she asked sarcastically.

“What?”

“Tarl, you couldn’t lie to me the day you met me! You’ve not gotten any better.”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“Well, um, they didn’t say anything else. Ok?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Elyse, really, I...”

“At least now I know.”

“What?”

“What’s worrying you. You’re lying to me.”

“Elyse, I’m not...”

“It’s ok, you can tell me tomorrow night.”

The nymph hastily stood from behind him and brushed her bottom of fallen leaves and dirt, Tarl grimaced and rose, too.

“Elyse...”

“It’s fine, really. I get it. *Wisdom of the elders* and all that. They probably told you to not tell me, right? That’s all you had to say.”

“Right, sorry, I mean...no! What I meant was, um...”

“Go to sleep, Tarl. I’ll see you tomorrow. *Stop worrying.*”

The nymph forced a smile, blew a kiss, and then melted into the trunk of the tree before Tarl could get out another word. He sighed, shook his head, and then muttered an apology.

“Stop it. I still love you, Tarl. Go to sleep.”

Though he could barely make it out in the dark, the bark of the trunk seemed to betray a smile and a wink. He winked back.

“I love you, too.”

Tarl turned and made his way back out of the woods. When he reached the edge of the forest, he stopped to listen. In the distance on the hill, he heard the droning of old voices. The temple was illuminated, its alabaster walls like the face of the moon against a background of evening sky. He felt a knot form in his stomach as he trudged towards his hovel. Tarl was wondering what sort of trial the elders were preparing when a familiar voice called out.

“Hey Whiskers! Got it all lit up for you and Elyse, eh?”

A pantauro trotted towards him, her smile wide as she pointed up to the temple.

Tarl forced a smile and replied quietly, “Aye, they do.”

“What’s the matter? Aren’t you excited?”

“Of course. Just, um, just tired.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry, Rishi. I am excited, really.”

“It was Elder Tharsh, wasn’t it?”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

Tarl visibly gulped but did not immediately reply. He raised an eyebrow in curiosity when Rishi began to giggle.

“He told me Natal was a risky choice, too.”

“He, he did?”

“Yep!” Rishi then scowled and said in a gravelly voice, “*Natal’s Leo blood may make his pride too great for this trial, Rishi.* He said that to me. The night before, if you can believe it!”

“Huh.”

“Look, I know you’re not supposed to ask, and I’m not supposed to tell, but don’t worry too much about it. I think he just does it to spook you.”

“Just what I need...”

“Natal thinks the elders say stuff like that to make you think.”

“Think?”

“Yeah, you know? Think about them. Are they really the right one? Of course, Natal was! I knew that then like I do now, but Natal might be right about the elders.”

“I hope so.”

“Do you love her, Tarl?”

“Of course!”

“Does she love you?”

“She says she does.”

“Yeah, Whiskers, but do you *believe* her?”

“Aye, I do, Rishi.”

“Then don’t get your tail in a kink over it!”

“Aye” he grumbled.

Tarl nodded and then sighed.

“Good grief, Tarl. You’re really hung up on this.”

“Sorry.”

“I hope you’ve said sorry to me more than you have to her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you been like this around her, too?”

“Just today. I dunno. Elder Tharsh...”

“What else did he say?”

Tarl heard the words in his mind and realized he was afraid to speak them. He shook his head and looked down at his paws. Rishi sighed with exasperation.

“Just spit it out, Tarl!”

“Nymphs are not *capable* of love” he mumbled.

Tarl looked up to see Rishi staring at him with horror.

“He...he said that?” she whispered.

“Aye.”

“That old ass...! Whiskers, I’m so sorry! What a horrible thing to hear!”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“Aye.”

Rishi shook her head and then gasped.

“What?”

“You, you didn’t tell Elyse, did you?”

“No, no, no. Of course not. I...”

“Thank the heavens! She’d have half the woods storming the temple!”

Tarl screwed up his face in confusion and then began to laugh.

“What?! You know it’s true!”

“Ha! She would, wouldn’t she?! Ah, Elyse...”

Tarl shook his head and then wiped a tear from his eye. The oaks weren’t much for conversation, but they respected Tarl a great deal. They would defend his beloved cherry blossom to the last splinter for his sake. After a good chuckle he grew quiet. Rishi sat before him and tilted her head, studying him.

“Really, Tarl. Are you that worried?” she asked.

“Aye, I am.”

“Why?”

“It was the way he said it.”

“How do you mean?”

Tarl shrugged and replied, “I dunno. It wasn’t mean or anything like that. He just sort-of said it. Like it was fact.”

“What did you say?”

Tarl grimaced and Rishi giggled.

“You told him what you really thought. Of course.”

“Aye, maybe.”

“You know, Natal has always been jealous of you for that.”

“What? Why?”

Rishi cracked a grin, “You spoke up before he did during his trial. In front of the whole clan, too.”

“Aye, well, Elder Tharsh was wrong and...”

“And Natal was supposed to answer, not you.”

“Sorry.”

Rishi laughed and retorted, “*No you’re not!* Did you mean it?”

“What?”

“What you said?”

“Aye! He’s a fine member of our clan. Proves it every day, doesn’t he?”

“He does. Elder Tharsh asked him to sit in on council next season.”

“What!?”

“Yep! So, tell me, Tarl: who do you think is a better judge of Elyse? You? Or Elder Tharsh?”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

"I'm a bit one-sided on that, Rishi..."

"And you weren't with me and Natal?"

"That's different."

"No, it isn't. I love him, Tarl, but only a little more than I love you."

Tarl forced a smile and nodded. Rishi strode up to him and encircled him with her arms, gently hugging him. He sighed and then returned the gesture.

She said quietly, "It runs in the family, Tarl, you know that. Father wasn't one of us at first. Neither was mama's mother. We've brought lots into the fold!"

"They were all tauri."

"So? The trial isn't about what she is, Tarl."

"Then why say it? Why tell me that?"

Rishi sighed and leaned back, "I dunno Whiskers, but if you think she's right for our clan I have no doubt that she'll get through the trial just fine."

"She's right for me, sis."

Rishi smiled then teased in a rough tone, "*Aye, what's right for you is right for us all, whiskers.*"

Tarl chuckled and nodded. An awkward silence passed between the siblings.

"I miss him" he finally said in a hushed tone.

"I know. I do, too. But you know what?"

"Hmm?"

"He'd think Elyse was right for you, too."

"You think so?"

"I know so, Whiskers. Besides, when's the last time a nymph was interested in having a family? In traveling? In experiencing something beyond her woods?"

"She's different, aye, I know."

"Yeah, but have you asked why?"

"Why she's different?" Tarl replied cautiously.

"Yeah?"

Rishi let go of her brother and sat back, folding her arms as she watched him ponder the question.

"I mean, she's a cherry blossom in the middle of an old forest..."

"Pfft. You can do better than that. Why is she different?"

"I dunno! She just is! I don't ask why, Rishi. I just love her."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe she's different because she loves you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Tarl, she wasn't all that different the first time you met her. Romp in the woods? Long baths in the pond? Curled up by the tree for a whole day? She was like most nymphs, right? How many times did we go looking for you last summer?!"

"Well, yes, at first. But she does love me! What? Why are you laughing?!"



# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

Tarl's ears burned as he watched his sister. Rishi pursed her lips into a thin smile, shook her head, and then took a deep breath.

"Ease up, whiskers! I know that. Listen to me."

"What's your point?" Tarl growled.

"Why did she stop being like the others?"

"I dunno! Because of me? Is that your point?"

Rishi winked and nodded once. Tarl grimaced and stared at the ground. He heard his sister sigh with frustration but ignored her.

"Tarl, every trial is unique. You know that much. I can't say that Elder Tharsh is wrong. What he said was harsh, but I don't know that he is wrong..."

"Rishi, I really don't want to hear..."

Rishi snapped, "Shush! Let me finish."

Tarl scowled and ducked his head low. His sister snorted and then continued.

"The point, Tarl, is that Elyse isn't like other nymphs *because of you*. The question is why? Think on that, Whiskers. Think on that when he asks you tomorrow evening if you're sure."

"If I'm sure? About her?"

"About any of it."

Rishi's cryptic answer elicited a look of confusion from her brother.

"Goodnight, Tarl, and try not to think so hard."

"You sound like mother."

"Yeah, well, she and I do agree on a lot."

"Does she approve..."

"Tarl, if she didn't, you would know, wouldn't you?"

Tarl nodded and then forced a smile.

"Thanks, sis."

"You're welcome."

"Tell Natal I said hello."

"Tell him yourself tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"You'll see, Whiskers. Go to sleep!"

"Aye."

He bid his sister good sleep and entered his hovel. Tarl turned on his bedding of blankets several times before finally settling. He curled his forepaws into a furry belly and then hugged his frame with his arms, wrapping as tightly into himself as he was able. The bedding felt large, too large. He didn't sleep well.

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

The next day began with a hard rap on his door. Rising unsteadily, Tarl bid his visitor to enter. To his surprise, it was Natal. His sister's mate looked him over once, shook his head in disappointment, and then began to bark orders at him.

"Come on then, Tarl. Up! Up, up, up! You can't start your big day like this!"

"Natal, what are you...?"

"Get up! Let's go! We need to get you all settled for the evening! Rishi and your mother are seeing to Elyse, and I've the honor of seeing to you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Less questions, more moving! Come on!"

Natal gripped Tarl by the arm and dragged him from his bedding, his hovel, and into the bright sunshine of morning. Tarl groaned and wiped his eyes, then stretched.

"What is it with Leos and early mornings..." muttered the pantaur.

Natal laughed and retorted, "Got nothin' to do with what I was. This is a big day, Tarl! First, we've got to get you cleaned up. How does a bath with the willow nymphs sound?"

"Very funny."

Natal gave a toothy grin and replied, "What? Just wanted to make sure you picked the right one is all!"

Tarl scowled and didn't reply. Immediately, Natal faltered. Tarl eyed him and realized his sister had likely shared the previous evening with her mate.

"T-Tarl, I, um, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"It's fine, Natal. I know."

"Yeah, well, remember that you know. Come on, I know a great spring to relax in."

The morning was passed in silence. Natal tried to recover his jovial disposition, but Tarl's mind was elsewhere. The spring was excellent for his weariness but did little to ease his worry. As they departed the spring to return to the community, Natal stopped Tarl along the way.

"Tarl, I didn't mean to ruin your morning like that" he said quietly.

"You didn't ruin anything, Natal. Except maybe my sister's taste in good music."

Natal laughed, "Oh, come on! Bone whistles are great!"

"For chewing on!"

"Seriously, though, the last thing I want is for you to go up there..."

Natal trailed off and looked towards the hill. Even in the woods, the temple was plain to see atop it. Tarl sighed and nodded.

"I know. It's not you, Natal. It's me. I just..."

"He's wrong, Tarl. She might not say it, but I will."

"Thank you, Natal."

"Thank you!"

"Why?"

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

"You said it first."

"Hmph."

"I, look, I can't say any more and, for what it is worth, I really think Elder Tharsh said what he said to make you think. I told Rishi that..."

"She told me. About you two."

"Oh, right! Yeah, well, like I was saying: I think he just wants you to think hard on it. On her."

"Could have just said that."

"Take it from me, Tarl. No, he couldn't."

"Why?"

"Because if your sister trusts me, you can, too."

"No, why did he have to say it that way?"

"It's a trial, Tarl. The clan...it's gotten this far because of it."

"It's gotten this far because of the community. Not a trial."

"A community filled with love."

Tarl grumbled, "There was no love in his words."

"You once told me love doesn't always sound like love."

"That was different."

"You say that, but I was convinced Rishi was telling me to leave."

"Again, that was different."

"Is it, though? Elder Tharsh doesn't just want what's best for the clan. You know that."

"*I did.*"

"Tarl, I dunno what else to tell you. Just, just don't go up there like this."

"Thanks, Natal. Real helpful."

"Just remember why you're up there."

"Because I have to be?"

"No, because you want to be."

"Natal, I really don't."

"Then don't. They'll just say no."

Tarl stared at Natal with shock. He stared right back then folded his arms.

"There is love in my words and you know it. Don't go up there if you don't want to."

"Natal, I have to. I..."

"*No, you don't.* Run off into the woods. Be happy! You wouldn't be the first, you know that."

"I can't do that. She wouldn't let me, anyway."

"No, she wouldn't. She loves you."

"Aye, she does."

"But I'm starting to wonder if you love her?"

"Ease up, Natal."

"I won't. She's my friend, too."

"She's more than a friend to me."

"Then act like it!"

"*Ease up, Natal*" growled Tarl.

"You didn't ease up for me, why would I for you!?"

"Because I couldn't see Rishi living her life without you."

"Yeah, well, can you see Elyse living her life without you?"

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

Tarl drew in a sharp breath. He cast his eyes down, slowly, and felt his heart racing.

"I dunno. I, I..."

"Could you live without her?"

Tarl answered immediately and firmly, "No. I couldn't."

"No, *you couldn't*. I remember the fire. I remember how fast you ran. We all do. We've known since then you couldn't live without her. She knows it, too! Rishi thinks you're going up there because Elyse wants to try, even though you don't."

"I want to try, Natal" replied Tarl in a whisper, "I'm just afraid of the answer."

"You should be. It will be no."

"How can you say that!?" whimpered Tarl.

"Because you won't be up there for you! The Elders would be right to say no. You don't get mated because someone else wants you. You get mated because you want them!"

Tarl's eyebrows danced as confusion mixed with understanding. Natal snorted and then shook his head with a sly grin.

"You really do think too hard. Your mother is right. So, from the top, let's do the oath."

"Natal..."

"If you can't do it for me, we'd best just go hang out at the spring and leave her up there, alone."

Tarl grimaced and retorted, "Fine, fine! Ok."

"You would choose this spirit over any other spirit?"

"Aye."

"You would claim her for yourself and only yourself?"

"Aye."

"You would choose death over life without her?"

"Aye."

"And she? She would choose your spirit over any other spirit?"

"Aye."

"She would claim you for herself and only herself?"

"Aye."

"She would choose death over life without you?"

Tarl paused and Natal raised an eyebrow.

"Tarl?"

"Aye."

"Tarl, you can't falter like that. You must be sure of this or they *will* say no."

"Elyse...has never risked her life, before."

"It doesn't matter if she has, Tarl. It matters if you think she would."

"Aye."

"As in, yes, she would?"

"Aye. She would."

"She would choose death over life without you?"

"Aye."

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“Good. Come on! Rishi said she had a hearty stew for us when we got back.”

“Venison and shrooms?”

“You think she’d do anything less for her Whiskers?”

Tarl chuckled and shook his head. Natal clapped him on the back, and they continued to the community. The afternoon passed much easier. They swapped stories of hunting prey, and mates, as the time to ascend the hill drew closer. They had just finished laughing over a past hunt when Elder Tharsh suddenly entered Natal’s hovel.

“Tarl. It is time.”

The greying pantaur did not wait for him to follow as he left the hovel. Tarl gulped and looked to Natal.

“Are you going up there for her, or you?” Natal asked solemnly.

“For me.”

“Good. I’ll see you, and her, on the other side.”

Natal smiled broadly and then motioned for Tarl to leave. The pantaur was slow to rise and then left the hovel to follow the elder. To his surprise, Elder Tharsh was already halfway up the hill. By the time Tarl caught up, they were almost to the temple. They silently walked side by side into the ancient place.

Tarl had been inside the temple many times, and tonight looked no different than any other night. Thirty torches, representing the thirty spirits of the world, encircled the central room of the temple. Towering overhead were four banners, each emblazoned with the element of an elder.

“Wait here” commanded Elder Tharsh.

Tarl sat and watched as the elder went towards his banner, that of fire, and sat beneath it. Elders Nak, Miesa, and Toln sat beneath water, wind, and earth, respectively. Across the room, Tarl spotted movement in the shadows.

“Bring forth the Lover!” commanded the elders in one voice.

Tarl’s eyes widened as Elyse stepped from the shadows and into the light of the thirty torches. She was stark naked, her wispy hair pulled over a shoulder and her hands clasped before her. Tarl’s heart raced as he saw her fidget slightly. Her smile was unmistakably giddy.

“Bring forth the trial!”

Tarl and Elyse both turned to look as a veiled contraption was trundled in on wooden wheels to the center of the room. Tarl couldn’t tell what the device was but heard the distinctive sounds of metal and mechanisms within it.

“Lover, step forward into the circle to be tried!”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

Elyse hesitated, then walked slowly into the circle of torches. She paused before the covered contraption and then waited for further instruction.

“Kin, step forward into the circle to witness the trial!”

Tarl swallowed, took a deep breath, and stepped into the circle on the other side of the device. They looked to one another briefly, sharing hesitant grins, before they heard the heavy doors of the temple shut one by one.

“Your trial begins, Lover Elyse. Prove you are worthy of this clan, and we will petition the spirits to remake you as one of us. Fail, and you shall never be pantaur. Remove the veil, Lover Elyse.”

Elyse gingerly gripped the black cloth and pulled on it. When it didn’t immediately fall away, she gulped and gripped with both hands then tugged hard. The cloth fell away to reveal a strange and terrible machine of war: a large crossbow. Elyse’s eyes bulged with fear, and she stepped back a few paces. Tarl held his ground, but he was confused.

“It has two...” he began to mutter, but the Elders silenced him.

“DO NOT SPEAK, KIN!”

Tarl ducked his head and nodded silent acceptance.

“Lover Elyse, before you is your trial: a crossbow with two bolts, two triggers, two choices. Nearest to you is a silver trigger. Pull this, and you would slay yourself. Nearest to our kin is a gold trigger. Pull this, and you would slay him. The oath of mating demands an answer: who would choose death over life without the other? A time will come when this answer is made for you. One of you will wither before the other. One of you will walk this world, alone, once more.”

Elder Nak stepped forward and motioned to Elyse.

“A nymph is unable to love, so say many. They hide in their trees and do not rush to the rescue of others nearby. They are afraid, selfish, and incapable. They would not serve this clan well.”

Elder Miesa then stepped forward and motioned to the device.

“Pantaur mate for life, as all strong creatures do. They place their lives at stake for their mates. A life of loneliness is worse than death. It is better to be alone first, than to have and to lose, so say many. A pantaur would rather die than live without their mate.”

Elder Toln then stepped forward and motioned to Tarl.

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“You have chosen a creature outside of our clan and in so doing have rejected what the clan offers you already. Not only is your lover on trial, but so, too, is our clan. The spirits graciously allow us to bring others into the fold, but we must not abuse this gift lest we lose it forever. The clan needs families, not just partners. It needs leaders, not just dancers. It needs mates, not just lovers.”

Elder Tharsh was the last to come forward and motioned to his fellow elders.

“Each trial is unique, inspired by the wisdom of the spirits and your elders. Answer it now, Lover Elyse, and prove your love! You must choose: who will break their oath? You? Or our kin? Witness her choice in silence, kin!”

Suddenly, the torches went out and the temple was cast into darkness. Moonlight filtered in from above, casting Elyse, Tarl, and the contraption in stark relief. They stood there for a time, separated by the awful puzzle. Tarl began to ball up his fists, but then found his fingers would not respond. He could glance around with his eyes, but he was otherwise paralyzed. Panic gripped him as he realized he could not speak. Horror dawned on him as he gazed at the steel tip of the crossbow bolt facing him. Elyse gulped and carefully approached the machine.

“Am, am I allowed to speak?”

There was no answer. Frozen in place, Tarl could not see if the elders remained in the shadows of the temple.

“Right, so...um...ok” mumbled the nymph as she pondered the contraption.

Elyse drew near to the crossbow and eyed the two triggers gleaming in the moonlight. She began to reach but paused short of them and backed away.

“Oh, maybe this? Tarl, step to the side. I’ll just shoot both.”

Tarl’s panic deepened. He could not move as his partner stared at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Tarl? I know you can’t speak. Just move.”

Elyse watched her frozen companion then sighed and walked around the contraption towards him, until she bumped into an invisible wall.

“Ow!” she exclaimed, touching her forehead as she frowned.

It was only then that Tarl saw fear begin to take hold of his partner. She felt her way around the wall and found it fully encircled her and the device. She was trapped.

“Choose, Lover Elyse. This is your trial.”

The instructions were spoken sternly, and the nymph’s eyes widened yet further.

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“You, you can’t move, can you?” she asked with a whisper.

Tarl tried to signal an answer with his eyes, but he wasn’t sure she understood. He could only watch her gulp and approach the dual crossbow once more. She mumbled to herself as she pondered the oath aloud and the two triggers.

“I can’t shoot mine without standing in front of it...” she grumbled.

Tarl could barely see what she meant. The silver trigger was set within an elaborate guard, requiring the poor nymph to stand right in front of her bolt to reach it.

“You or me?” she whispered, “Tarl, I, I don’t know...”

Elyse began to tear up and Tarl felt his panic give way to a different emotion: rage.

*How could they do this to her?! How could they treat her like this? Did Natal know? Did Rishi?*

“I’m sorry, Tarl...”

“Choose, Lover Elyse. This is your trial.”

“What if I can’t!?”

“Then you forfeit our acceptance!”

Their declaration thundered in the temple and Elyse cowered.

*I’m going to kill them.*

“I must choose, then.”

Tarl’s panic returned as Elyse stood and returned to the crossbow. She swallowed hard.

“It’s not going to actually kill someone. That, that would be stupid” she said matter-of-fact, “So, I just, um, I just have to choose. *Correctly.*”

Elyse mumbled the last word and grimaced.

*That’s right, Elyse. Just choose. It doesn’t matter. I don’t care. None of this matters. We can still be us. We can cross that stream, together.*

“So, Tarl, who do I pick?”

Unable to answer, Tarl watched and thought on his own answer.

“I guess I should pick me. I would never hurt you, after all.”

*Aye, that makes sense. She’s the one on trial, she wouldn’t dare hurt kin if she was one of us.*

“That’s why my trigger is so hard to get to, right?”



# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

*Right. It forces you to think. To think too hard! Just like mother always warns.*

“But maybe that’s a trick?” she whispered.

*No! No, no, no! Why would you shoot me? I mean, I’d gladly die for you, but don’t...*

“You would die for me. I know you would. I remember the fire.”

*Yes, Elyse, I would. But not now! This isn’t about me! This is about you!*

“The oath. I know the answer” she said with a thin smile, gripping the gold trigger.

*YOU ARE ON TRIAL! NOT ME!*

Elyse pulled the gold trigger and the bolt sailed right through Tarl. There was no wound. Before either of them could react, the invisible wall between them became solid like a red curtain. The torches relit, revealing two elders on his side. Immediately, they began to question him.

“She shot you! Why?” demanded Elder Tharsh.

“Your Lover chose her life over yours! Why?” added Elder Toln

Tarl could move once again. He balled up his fist and turned his angry eyes on Elder Tharsh.

“How could you?” he whispered indignantly, “HOW COULD YOU DO THIS!?”

Tarl began to step towards the Elder but found his paws would not move. The Elders looked on with amusement.

“Do not seek violence on us, kin. Answer the questions. Now, *you* are on trial!”

“Why did she shoot you?” asked Elder Toln again, drawing closer, “Why did she choose her life over yours?”

“It doesn’t matter! I would gladly die for her. She said so herself!”

“Ah, but would she gladly die for you? She also must take the oath!” replied Elder Tharsh

“Why choose you instead of herself?” asked Elder Toln, again.

“Why force that choice on her!? It is unfair! It is wrong! YOU! YOU ARE WRONG!”

“I see passion, kin, but not concern. I see hate, not love.”

“You see what you want to see! You wanted her to fail!”

“Or do we see what *you* wanted to see? You desired that she slay herself, did you not?”

“Shut up! You don’t know her! I love her! That’s all that matters!”

“No, kin, her choice is what matters! Answer us, OR WE WILL SAY NO!”

Elder Tharsh’s words rattled Tarl into submission.

“No, don’t...don’t take this from her. Please.”

“Why did she choose her life over yours?” asked Elder Toln.

“I, I don’t know. Please, Elders, please. Don’t take this from her. From me.”

“She took your life already, kin.”

“Because she loves me!”

“A true answer, perhaps, but one without wisdom.”

“I, I don’t know! What do you want?!”

“She has no place in our clan, kin, if you cannot see the foundations of her love.”

“So, you know it! You know she is right!”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“Our clan is not built on whether we know it, kin. It is built on whether you, the kin, knows it.”

Tarl was flabbergasted. He felt his anger returning but willed himself to control it.

*There is still a chance. We can still do this. Elyse...she must be talking to the other two.*

“Is she with them? The other elders?”

“She answers the same questions, yes” replied Elder Toln.

“Better than you, if my spirit does not deceive me.”

Tarl looked at Elder Tharsh and saw his sly smile grow wider.

“She would!” shot back Tarl, “She knows more than you do!”

“Perhaps she does. We learn much from trials.”

Elder Toln asked, “You still have not answered us, kin. Why her choice?”

Tarl thought hard on the question.

*I don't know! She said I would die for her. Like that made it her right? She thought the silver trigger was a trick, but why? She didn't even hesitate to shoot me. Why, Elyse? Why?*

“Nymphs only think for themselves, so say many.”

Tarl bristled at the repeated words.

*That's not true! Elyse thinks for me all the time. She was thinking only of me yesterday! All she did was worry about me worrying. She tried to relax me. She tried to calm me and tell me she'd be ok. She only thinks of me, not herself! She...*

Tarl's eyes widened.

“An answer?” asked the elders in unison.

“The oath. She said it was the oath.”

“How do you mean, kin?” asked Elder Toln.

“A pantaur would rather die than continue to live, alone.”

“And what meaning do you find in this?” asked Elder Tharsh.

“She would give me that death, rather than have me suffer without her.”

“Seems a bit strange, kin?”

“Not to me. I couldn't live without her.”

“But she can live without you?”

“Aye, maybe.”

“That breaks the oath” said Elder Toln sternly.

Tarl looked Elder Toln in the eye and smirked.

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“No, it doesn’t! *She’s not one of us*. You said it yourself, I chose outside of the clan. I put the clan on trial with my choice.”

“Indeed, kin, you do! And now see what your choice has wrought? You choose someone that would defy our oath!” replied Elder Tharsh.

“Aye, I do. She would never force me to break the oath. You couldn’t have passed this trial. None of you could! I couldn’t! You chose a trial only she could pass!”

The elders raised their eyebrows in surprise. Tarl laughed.

“She’s a nymph! I don’t love her because she’s like us. I love her because she isn’t! She isn’t like anyone I have ever known. I would die without her, and she knows it. I accept her choice, even if you don’t. I still love her. I still claim her, with or without your approval!”

The elders backed away, looked to one another, and nodded once. Elder Tharsh then spoke.

“I have presided over two-hundred and sixty-seven trials, kin. Over one hundred involved nymphs. *None have ever passed*. It is not hard for our young to become enamored with the beauty of the woods, but beauty alone is not love.”

Elder Toln then said, “Long before you came to us yesterday, many asked us when you would bring Lover Elyse to trial. I looked through the annals and found no nymphs brought into the fold. We did not press you, as we do others, for we feared this day as much as you.”

“Feared it? Why?” asked Tarl, confused.

“Kin, we do not desire to say no” admonished Elder Tharsh, “but we take our duty seriously. All have seen Lover Elyse is different. Yet the spirits do not ask us what we think.”

“They ask what you think” finished Elder Toln.

“I don’t think, elders. I know. I love her and she loves me.”

“Indeed, but love, like all things that grow, requires a foundation.”

“And now, kin, you have yours.”

The red wall vanished to reveal Elyse between the two other elders, balancing her delicately as she tried to master an additional two legs. She giggled with glee when she saw Tarl’s look of astonishment.

“THE OATH!” cried the elders in unison, “Tarl, do you choose this spirit over any other spirit?”

Tarl nodded vigorously and said, “Aye!”

“You would claim her for yourself and only yourself?”

“Aye!”

“You would choose death over life without her?”

“Aye! Gladly!”

Elyse beamed as tears formed in her eyes. Turning towards her, the four elders cited the oath again.

“Lover Elyse, do you choose this spirit over any other spirit?”

“Yes!”

“You would claim him for yourself and only yourself?”

# BROKEN OATH

by Tyler Tillerson

“Yes!”

“You would choose death over life without him?”

Elyse paused and then shook her head.

“No. I would live because I am his.”

The elders grinned and then said as one, “Speak the binding, mates.”

Tarl gulped and said, “I am yours, and you are mine.”

Elyse choked on a giggle and replied quietly, “I am yours, and you are mine.”

Elder Tharsh lightly touched Elyse’s shoulder.

“We welcome you, Elyse, mate of Tarl, and we thank you.”

“W-why?”

Elder Miesa replied wryly, “We’ll need a new oath, it seems. It’s about time.”

“A new oath?” asked Tarl.

“Indeed, we’re overdue for one. I was sure Natal would give us guidance...but someone else spoke up before he did” answered Elder Tharsh dryly.

“Go and celebrate, mates, and remember well what the spirits have shown you this night.”

“What *you* have shown us. Shown me” said Tarl quietly.

The elders nodded and then withdrew to the task of dousing the thirty torches. The peculiar crossbow was nowhere to be seen as they left the temple, arms locked. Elyse walked unsteadily and apologized a great deal for it.

“Stop it. I still love you” teased Tarl.

“You do, don’t you?”

The evening passed into celebration. Rishi teased her brother for being so worried while Natal took it upon himself to teach Elyse how to dance with four legs. Through it all, the new mates beamed with gladness and pride. When it was time for sleep, many jokes were had to expect a family soon. Curling into one another in his hovel, Tarl laughed when Elyse complained the bedding was no longer large enough for them both. He breathed in her new scent deeply, pleased that even her fur still hinted of cherry blossoms.

“Really, though, it needs to be bigger!”

“Aye, we’ll cross that stream when we get to it.”

Elyse’s eyes twinkled as she curled her new tail around his and giggled.

“Yes, we will, together.”