



Geohhol

Festival of Feast and Fire



E.R. Zaugg



"Tapperhet gjør en mann rikere enn mynter.

Valor makes a man wealthier than coins."

-Nordrian Saying

Tobias closed his eyes, ignoring the brilliant annual display of lights in the night sky his people called *Nordlys*—Northern Lights. He could still see some of their brightness through his closed eyelids, but it wasn't enough to clear away his internal doubts. His people's annual festival of *Geohhol* was supposed to be a joyous occasion—three nights of feasting, drinking, music, dancing, and bonfires centered around midwinter night. The unrest inside him didn't allow him to feel that joy.

A few weeks ago, his father had been seriously injured in a raid. He was dying. It was a terrible thought, but that didn't make it any less true, regardless of what their *Vö/va*, their seeress, said. Even more unfortunately, losing his father wasn't the worst part. Tobias's brother Hakon would have his road to power after their father's death, and that would be far worse.

The man was pure evil.

Tobias could still remember the day he'd discovered just how much of a ruthless bastard his brother was. Hakon had always had a cruel streak, especially where Tobias was concerned. They were of a similar age, but Tobias had been adopted—taken in by their father during a raid when his birth parents were slain. Kindness of any sort was rare amongst Nordrians, but that day Tobias had learned what kind of man his brother truly was.



He shuddered just thinking about it.

It had been their first raid as men of the clan. They were still so young then, but Hakon had already chosen his path in life. A certain amount of violence was to be expected on raids—their reputation and safety as a clan depended upon it. Sometimes they were even known to take women or bring young girls back to the clan in their boats. But that night, what Hakon had done outweighed their normal brutality and became something else entirely.

Tobias could still remember the charnel smell of flesh, and the young woman screaming for Hakon to spare her family.

He felt himself tremble as a momentary cold wind blew over the cliff where he was standing, chilling him instantly even with the large bonfire at his back and the animal hide clothing he was wearing. Winter was a harsh mistress. Maybe that was the point, and what scared him so much—that Hakon had been right all along. Tobias wasn't actually born into their clan. Though adopted as a child, he was still an outsider, and his heart lacked their brutal nature. He knew how to fight with an ax, shield, or sword; Tobias was a warrior like they all were. But when it came to hurting the innocent, punishing those weaker than him, or harming women, he just didn't have it in him.

What would that make him after his father's death?

That was the core of his internal doubts—wondering what would become of his home and where he truly belonged. When Hakon took power, he would make certain that Tobias was never accepted here.



That left him with decisions to make. He could go home, where he'd been as a child before the clan took him in, but he didn't know anything about life in Aedonia. The other choice was to seek a place amongst another clan, but that had its own fair share of shifting winds, especially once Hakon took power and started seeking alliances or making enemies.

Tobias felt like he was standing on a shelf of ice that was cracking, getting ready to crumble and slide into the frozen seas.

Another cold wind gusted over him, bringing a familiar smell. Her scent.

He smiled, forgetting his thoughts for a moment, and leaned his face against hers as Ayla wrapped her arms around him resting her head on his shoulder.

"You're supposed to be enjoying *Geohhol*." Her voice was warm against the cold. "Not worrying into the wind alone."

Tobias's smile widened and he actually laughed a little. Ayla always had a way of bringing that out of him. To the clans, *bekymre seg mot vinden*—worrying into the wind—was their way of saying that you were wasting your time or being a fool. They believed that the wind would come and do its will, regardless of your thoughts or desires; it was the way of things. Most used the phrase in a derogatory sense, but Ayla was only teasing him, which he knew well.

"I know. Thank you, my friend." He patted her arm. "There is just so much happening. I can't help it."

Ayla smiled, closing her eyes, showing that she was comfortable and at ease. "There is a lot happening, I know. But standing here worrying over every detail will only make it worse for you."



Tobias closed his eyes too, enjoying the simple presence of his best friend. "Has your father decided what he's going to do?"

She sighed, a sound almost lost in the cold wind that blew over them. "When Hakon takes power, our clan will withdraw from the alliance and go home."

"Is that wise?"

He could feel Ayla tense against him, which was answer enough, but she spoke anyway. "Hakon will never be the leader your father was. I told my father to wait, but he believes others will leave as well, making any reprisal on Hakon's part foolish." She tightened her embrace. "What will you do? My offer to bring you with us still stands."

Tobias sighed. "I can't do that. His resources may be too sparse at the beginning for any serious reprisal, but that wouldn't hold true for anyone harboring me."

"Does he truly hate you so much?"

He turned around and looked at her. Their eyes met. "He does. I've always been an outsider to him and those who think like he does."

Ayla nodded. Her eyes looked sad, but she also understood. "Come sit by the fire and share my blankets for another night." She gently touched his cheek. "You can be sad with me. You can show me your pain."



Ayla put the last piece of salted elk into her mouth and chewed.

It was almost *Geohhol* again, which made this the fifth one she'd spent out here alone, in vain hope. After eating, she tightened the ties on her bracers, then stood up before checking her armor's other bindings. Leather armor was heavier than clothing, and she hated having to wear it constantly now, but times were not safe for those Hakon and his ilk hated. Even out here in the wilds she had to prepare for any encounter—especially out here, where her clan wasn't at her side.

She threw on her *röggvarafeldur*, a rugged cloak of wool and ermine fur made by her clan. It wasn't deep winter yet, but the northern climbs got cold early, and today was no exception.

Ayla shielded her eyes and looked out over the nearby cliffs across the ice seas. A small desperate hope deep within her heart that she would see sails—not just those of any ship, but *his*.

She hated to admit the weakness, even to herself, but she needed her friend.

He had left in what seemed like a lifetime ago, following his father's death and the fracturing of the clans. Things had only gotten worse for them since then. Maybe if she had told him how she'd felt—how much she had loved his hands on her, and their times together just talking—he would have stayed.

Where are you, Tobias?



Sighing, Ayla covered her small campfire in snow, then picked up her *kesja*—fishing spear—and ax, hanging the latter at her waist before starting to walk. It was cold and gray, but the skies were calm, which meant it would be a good day for fishing. Not far from here there was a route down the cliffs by the river *Brennevin*, whose name meant "spirits" in their old tongue. Everything out here had fancy names in the old tongue. Even these cliffs were called *Guddommer*—The Deities—because you could see them for more than a day's sail out at sea.

She knew all the old names out here in the wilderness that she loved. In many ways it felt more like home than anywhere else.

Where the Brennevin met the ice seas should be good eel fishing this time of year. With a little luck, she would eat well today.

By mid-morning, Ayla's surmise that it would be a good day for fishing had proven correct.

She smiled to herself while pulling another eel off her *kesja*, before stuffing it into her almost-full sack. She'd found the perfect spot—a rock outcropping under a large tree—and her three-pronged spear was making quick work of any eels she found. Soon she would go back to her small camp and start cooking them. It would be nice to have some different food. Salted elk was getting tiresome.

Ayla started to turn around and head back into the water but stopped immediately upon hearing the mewling cry of a bear cub.

She scanned her surroundings quickly. Where there was a cub, there would be a mother, and bears were fearsome adversaries when protecting their young.



The cub was easy to locate—the small thing was crawling out of the river a short ways from her—but there was no mother Ayla could see. She took a few moments to look at the cub more closely. The poor thing had matted fur covered in dark red blood, and it was small enough to be a yearling. That probably meant it had lost its mother to hunters.

Ayla picked up her sack of eels and turned away. It was time to go. Clan Torden didn't hunt bears with cubs, but many other clans, including those of their enemies, had no such limitations.

She stopped though, as something tugged at her insides.

Tobias would help the cub.

He had always believed that animals and their spirits were more worthy than Innatraeans. It used to surprise her that even though he'd been born somewhere else, Tobias had always been a follower of the old ways.

It was time for her to go, but she could spare a few moments.

Ayla turned back around and took out an eel, throwing it to the small cub. "Eat well, little friend. But don't stay long—it's not safe here."

With that, she headed back to the cliffs and her camp.

Hours later, Ayla sat by her campfire, warming her fingers and waiting for the eels to cook.



The fire had taken a considerable amount of time to prepare, because she'd had to find drier wood and keep it small for fear of being seen. Even with danger possibly near, you still needed a fire to survive Nordrian nights. Moving her camp into this small copse of trees also helped, both with hiding her presence and staying warmer. There was no snow on the ground in here yet, and the tree limbs helped hold in the heat of her little fire.

Then she looked up, startled, as the branches across the fire shook.

Another Innatraean would have made more sound earlier, and wild animals didn't come close to camps unless they were desperate for food—which the season was still too early for.

What?

Ayla placed a hand on her ax and waited, ready for almost anything to come through those branches.

What did eventually break through into her sight still surprised her.

The little bear cub limped into her camp, cried again, and collapsed on the other side of her fire. It was breathing heavily and looked near to death. She couldn't help but feel sorry for the small creature.

But why had it followed her?

Its eyes half-opened as it let out another quiet mewling cry.

Ayla smiled, remembering a phrase Tobias had once taught her. "*En Innatraea som har en trofast venn har et speil av sjelen deres.*" An Innatraean who has a faithful friend has a mirror of their soul.



She slowly got up to give the little bear cub some of her water and another eel. There was no way she could let the small thing starve out here, especially after it had followed her.

Trust deserved trust.

Ayla slowly knelt by the little bear cub, placing an eel by its mouth, then gently laying her hand on its side. She could feel it breathing—shallow but peaceful.

She had never imagined herself as a mother, especially after Tobias had left. But maybe it felt something like this—caring whether or not another defenseless being lived or died, wanting to take care of them.

A mirror for her soul.

She had always been a solitary person. And so were most bears.

She would name it Bjorn, after her brother they'd lost in a raid years ago.

Ayla smiled and went to get a cloth from her bags. Its wounds needed cleaning.

Fate was an unusual thing.



