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Tanngnjóstr (Teeth-Grinder)

The wind howled against the wooden walls, shaking the window panes and door frames. Nothing but white could be seen out in the bitter world. Piles of white, swirling tornadoes of white, long stretches of white you could sink your feet into. Lifeless white, on a backdrop of white.

Inside the small shared room of the farmstead, yellow candle-light danced on the walls and the orange embers from last night's fire crackled in the hearth. A chair stood next to the barred door, carved of dark wood, with chipped blue paint peeling away from small carved flowers. On the chair was a pair of wet boots, brown and soggy. The table by the fire was topped with a basket of breads and an assortment of dried foods; red meats, blue berries, green herbs for the soups.

He stood by the door clad in wools from head to toe. Most were dyed and stitched with meaningful patterns; pictures of his family, their history, and even fantastic tales from surrounding kingdoms. His daughters used to tell him how the stories and swirls of color would assure his safe return and he would laugh his hearty laugh and thank them with bearded kisses, even though he knew it was not the pictures that kept him warm in the blizzards.

Now all his daughters seem to talk about is Luuk, his son in law. How Sophie, his eldest, is so lucky to have wed him, how strong and helpful he is, how we couldn't possibly make it through the winters without him.

He sighed with a heavy wheeze, lowering himself onto a bench by the fire. His bones creak as he leans forward to tighten his boots. His large, weathered face turned to the fire and the light sparkled in his grey beard that blanketed his chest.

"Pappa?" a soft voice said from behind him. He turned with heavily booted steps to face his youngest daughter, as she delicately let her blonde hair out of her braids. Her pink lips were turned forward, giving youth to her newly mature visage. He often felt his daughters would go to bed as children one night, and awaken the next morning as women.

"It's early Lotte, what're you doing up?" he asked.

"I'm not twelve anymore Pappa," she replied, crossing her slender arms across her flowered nightgown. "Where are you goin'?"

"To find Tann, he went missing last night."

"The goat? But, Pappa the storm. You can't go," she begged. A rosy blush gathered on the apples of her pale cheeks. "I'm sure Luuk could--"

“I’m sure Luuk can stay in bed just as well,” he said, his wiry grey mustache twitching.

“But Pappa! What if you don’t come back?” she asked, her voice quieting to a whimper.

“I’ve always come home, Lotte,” he paused seeing her wide eyes, furrowed brow and her small crinkled nose. He patted his chest with his large gloved hand. “Your stories will keep me safe my dear.” His grey, wrinkled eyes creased with a warm smile.

“Pappa,” she started quietly, her big eyes looking around the small room. “You don’t have to do things like this anymore, you’re old now.” He looked to her for quite some time, a hardness in his face like his brow was made of stone, frozen in place. “I’m sure Luuk wouldn’t mind if-”

“No Lotte,” he said, his voice rumbled in his chest. He towered over her by at least a foot and a half. “As the head of this family, I am responsible for the stead.”

“But Pappa-” she started. He turned away from her with loud footsteps. He pulled the bar off the door, and gripped the handle with his massive hands.

“I’m sorry Lotte, it must be done,” he said, yanking the door open. “It is my duty.” A wall of white air hit him in the chest, winding him. He leaned into the blizzard, and pulled the door closed behind him.

The ice whistled through the sky, slashing across his reddened face. Bursts of it threatened to push him over as he slowly hiked the steep mountainside. It carried faint bleats from a distressed goat on its swirling arms as they streaked across the ground. Flurries filled his vision, as the white ambient light of the sun brightened behind the clouds. Lumps had formed where his usual landmarks were. The rocks, the trees, all covered.

He circled around where the great birch usually stood, now just icy twigs poked from beneath the heavy blanket of snow. The rain cliff was to his right, it has fallen away in the fall with heavy flooding. If the girls were younger, they could have had a fun time sledding down it after the storm finished padding it safely with soft snow.

As he trudged ever upwards towards the peaks of the white mountain, he swore the bleats were louder. To his right, the sledding hill steepened into something more of a cliff as he circled around. Above him a crack of darkness loomed, where ice had fallen away from the rock beneath it. All else before him was white, like he had stepped into another world. Beneath his feet, the white earth crunched and turned to soft powder. The looming sky shone with white radiance, and the earth reflected it and glowed with the same intensity, beaming into his sore eyes.

His leathery nose and cheeks were the red of a summer apple. Frost collected on his long grey beard, making it seem fuller and whiter. He looked down and the stories in his woools couldn't be seen beneath the layers of snow stuck to him.

“Tann!” he called into the white void. His own rasped voice answered back to him, muted by the harsh air. He stepped forward, planting his foot before he shouted again. And again it echoed back to him. For a moment, the wind stopped, the air stood still. The ice and snow stood vigilant and watchful.

The soft snow beneath his feet lurched with a muted crunch, like a ship breaking apart in the deep waters of the ocean. He lost his footing as the white earth moved without his permission. As he fell, he could see a crevice of black rock opening up where he had stood a moment before. The earth rumbled like a growling giant as it carried him over the sheer edge of the mountain. He fell, surrounded by a chandelier of sparkling snowflakes. The snow lifted from his woools as they fluttered in the air, he could see the beautiful colors his daughters had stitched in, their love that warmed him on days like this. A small opening in the sky that he wouldn't have otherwise seen let in the beautiful blue of the sky just before he hit the ground and all was dark.