

'We shouldn't stop until we reach the village. These mountains are dwarf land, and they brook no trespassers.'

Snow lay thick upon the pass, and gathered up upon cliffs hung with ice and crusted with frost across their jagged spurs. Under the pale moonlight, the towering walls of rock seemed like the ramparts of some great fortress, built not of brick or stone but polished-white bone. Ramparts that had stood for aeons under the assault of the wind that battered its way through the pass, howling its frustration into the night. And through the darkness that lay in their shadow struggled a dozen, small figures.

'We can't... we can't go on!' Neveras shouted, the wind snatching away his words. 'We're not moving fast enough and the cold is getting worse - we won't make it!'

'We won't make it if the dwarves catch us, either. You think it's cold out here, try asking a dwarf for mercy. We head for the village.' their guide repeated, gathering his furs about his collar.

'How many more miles is it?' Halbeck joined in. 'Two? Three? We won't manage another two hundred paces and you know it. Either we start a fire and pitch our tents now, or we freeze!'

Wulfcar finally stopped. He was silent for a moment, as he thought to himself what a fool he'd been to take this job. Six men, three women, two children - and the men were barely men at that. Difficult enough to get them through the mountains in summer, suicide in winter. What had he been thinking? The city man was right - they weren't moving fast enough, and they wouldn't get to Pinevale in time.

He shivered, and not from the cold. The way the shadows fell here, every boulder and tree stump looked like one of the stunted folk; every pebble an eye, every fissure a twisted smile. He looked up. Past the silhouette of the spear-like peak beside them, the stars were twinkling bright as diamonds. Some day, some clever dwarf would find a way to fly up like a bird and pluck them from the sky... but until that happened they were stuck with the little bastards down here.

There wasn't a cloud in sight. It was going to get cold tonight, especially with the wind running its icy fingers over them. If they didn't find shelter soon they wouldn't be making it to Pinevale or anywhere else. Just another set of frozen lumps with features that looked too much like faces.

Maybe he could make it, if he left the others. He thought about it for a long, hard moment. But what sort of man takes an honest traveller's coin, leads them out into the middle of nowhere, then leaves them to die?

Not Wulfcar, son of Hilmar.

'Can we make it back to Alderford?' That was one of the women... Lila? Or Freya? 'Maybe we'd move faster going downhill.' Her children huddled by her skirts.

'No. Too far.' Wulfcar said bluntly. 'It's too late, we have to start looking for a place to camp.'

'But the dwarves...'. That was Lucien, a big man, but the softest of any of them. City life did that to you. 'We've heard what they do to travellers. They'll see our fire...' his voice quavered, 'It's not that cold, we can keep going to the village.'

'No. Halbeck is right, we won't make to Pinevale now. There may be dwarves nearby, but there may not. What we can be certain of is that the cold will kill us all before the dwarves even have a chance to if we try to go on.'

'So, what then?' shrieked Lucien. 'We go forward, we die. We go back, we die. We stay here, and likely we still die! Some guide you've been, to lead us here.' His eyes darted around like an animal caught in a trap, and Wulfcar sympathised. They were all of them caught together, and if the blame weren't his then whose?

'Peace, Lucien.' Neveras said. 'We were the ones that insisted on leaving Alderford. It does no good to dwell on it now, anyway. Better to think about how to survive this.'

'Aye.' said Wulfcar. 'Every moment we spend talking is a moment wasted. We need shelter, somewhere out of the wind where we can light a fire. Look for an overhang or a cave.'

They split up, the seven men divided into three teams of two, while Lucien stayed with the women and children. He'd be no use as a protector, but neither would any of the others, and at least Lucien was big enough to carry the two younger children above the snow, and holler if danger appeared. One team went back along the path, and one team went forward, while Wulfcar and Halbeck started climbing the slope on their left; to their right lay the sheer wall of the mountain. The only mercy was that it wasn't snowing, but the wind and the darkness were challenge enough. Wulfcar had picked his way a good hundred paces up through the snow-laded scree before the whisper of a shout came to him out of the darkness. One of the others had found something.

It was Neveras, with Umberto, a quiet man who'd barely said a dozen words to Wulfcar in their three weeks on the road together. They'd found a fissure in the rock, a crevice barely wide enough at the entrance for Wulfcar to shimmy through, but that opened up a little further in. At the back it was just spacious enough for their whole party to huddle together, and the crack rose up and up into the darkness, so that they could light a fire and not be choked by the smoke. Better still, this deep in the rock any fire they lit wouldn't be seen by anyone on the mountainside.

The youngest child, Yelena, was asleep almost as soon as they sat down; Wulfcar thought she was about five or so - she had done well to get this far. Her older brother Kuvo soon followed. 'Make sure they're close enough to the fire to get warm, but don't let it burn them.' Wulfcar told Lila, though there wasn't much of a fire to speak of. No wood nearby; they'd done the best they could with the kindling they carried, and in such a small space that was good enough.

Rafen was the eldest child at ten, and he didn't fall asleep straight away. Instead, he whined. 'Why did we even come here? We should have stayed at home. I want to go back to Fyrden, and our house, and all my friends, and I want to have presents under the tree like we used to. I hate this, I want to go home!' His throat was so hoarse and his lips so cracked he had trouble forming the words; no wonder his resolve was slipping.

'I told you, son.' Neveras whispered to his child, 'The king would have killed us if we'd stayed. He hates people like us, it was too dangerous to live in the capital anymore. I wish it weren't so as much as you do, but it is, and there's nothing we could do to sway him.'

'We could just do what he wanted.' Rafen muttered. 'Worship his new god.'

Neveras' mouth hung open for a moment, speechless. 'Son... our traditions... our faith...' he began, trying to find the right words.

Wulfcar sighed. If there was ever a time not to have a crisis of confidence, it was halfway up a mountain. He turned to Rafen. 'Boy, I've never been to Fyrden - never been to any city, actually. I don't know much about kings or gods. But what I do know is that men who want to take something from you don't stop just because you give it to them. That's true wherever you are in the world. Once they see their threats work, they ask for more, and more, until they've taken everything you have. So if you're going to have to make a stand at some point, you might as well do it at the beginning when you've still got plenty worth fighting for. Like presents under a tree. New king hates that, so I've heard. Now get some sleep - believe me, so long as you have a warm fire and a good night's rest, the world isn't so bad.'

To Wulfcar's slight surprise the boy actually listened. Neveras nodded his thanks.

'You should get some sleep too.' he told them all. 'I'll keep watch, just in case, then wake one of you in a few hours to take over.'

He was sorry to leave the fire behind him, but at least he was out of the wind now, and in his fur-lined winter gear the cold wasn't too bad. He settled himself a little way back from the mouth of the fissure; it was so pitch-black out there that he wouldn't be doing much watching anyway. Instead he'd listen, sitting there alone, keeping his ears sharp for anything that might be out there in the night.

There was nothing but the darkness and the wind.

After a while he heard something behind him in the cave, then realised there were footsteps.

'I told you, I'll wake you for the next watch. You can get a few more hours sleep.' he called back over his shoulder.

There was no answer. A sudden chill of fear ran down Wulfcar's spine, and he spun round.

He was just in time to see the hammer coming down on his head.

* * * *

Down, down, down - down through rock and stone into the deep, dark places of the world neither sun nor moon ever see. Down into a realm where men only walk in their nightmares, and even goblin and troll fear to go. Down, down, down, beneath the weight of mountains high and ages long.

Down into the halls of the dwarves.

Wulfcar blinked open groggy eyes, and blinked again because it was so dark there was almost no difference. His head was pounding, ringing like a blacksmith's anvil. He could already feel the lump forming on his forehead. Shaking his head blearily, he tried to look around.

It was only then he realised he was being carried. He was trussed up like a deer being brought back from the hunt, with thick, strong ropes wrapped around his arms and legs. Tied to some sort of crude stretcher - he could feel the two wooden poles digging into back as he bobbed and swayed to the footfall of those who bore him along.

And slowly, the cold horror of realisation crept up his body like a million frost-bitten spiders prickling his skin. Addled though he was, exhausted though he was, there was no refuge from the truth: he was in the hands of the dwarves.

And they were carrying him to his death.

Wulfcar looked about, as much as he could, his eyes now adjusting to the gloom. His captors carried no

lights, but the darkness wasn't complete, for in the rock around them there were scatterings of some small crystals that glowed very, very faintly. He saw Halbeck, just beside him, tied to a bier that must be the same as his. He was facing backwards, so he could also see Lucien, his hefty frame taking up most of the passage, and one of the children beside him. He got the sense that there were several more people around him, but whether it was the rest of his party or more of their captors, there was no way of knowing.

If the rest of them had been slaughtered back at their campfire, it might be a mercy. The dwarves were as well known for their inventiveness and craftsmanship as they were for their lack of compassion.

The dwarves. He'd seen a few before, for on rare occasions they left their subterranean homes to trade with the surface races. But the traders were always timid folk, only leaving their lodgings at twilight just before the human merchants went home for the day, scurrying from one store to the next like they wanted to keep away from both the glare of the sun and the eyes of men. He'd kept away from them, but the ones that came to village or town were harmless enough.

These were different. They did not scurry, they marched, stomping rhythmically as if they could hear some great drum that he could not. It was said in ancient tales that the dwarves could hear the heartbeat of the Earth itself, they lived so deep. They did not cower or shrink, but held themselves high, and though in the light of the sun Wulfcar would have laughed at the thought of a dwarf standing tall, down here it seemed like they towered over him.

They wore their dark leather coats, with their pointed hoods, as he had seen them wear on the surface. But these ones didn't wear thick, tinted goggles to protect them from the sun. They wore masks, leering, grimacing masks with hooked noses and sharp, scowling brows. Of the four he could see, one was bone-white, one was void-black, one was chestnut and had horns sprouting from its brow, and one was a deep red, like the last embers of a fire, and had a forked tongue poking between its lips. They all bore runes inscribed upon the cheeks and forehead.

'Wulfcar.' He heard a whisper. 'Wulfcar! Can you hear me?' For one insane moment he thought the dwarves were trying to get his attention, then he realised it was Halbeck, right beside him.

'I hear you, friend.' he whispered back.

'Thank the heavens.'

'Don't thank anyone just yet. Our fortunes seem to be on a downward turn.'

'Better than they were a moment ago. At least now you're awake. You know the dwarves better than us, tell me: do you know where they're taking us?'

'No. I know only that it's a place we don't want to go.' He eyed the dwarves furtively, but either they hadn't noticed the two of them talking or they didn't care. 'Halbeck... did they get everyone? Did any of us escape?'

Halbeck shook his head sadly. 'We had no chance. They were just there, suddenly, in the cave all around us. We didn't even have a chance to fight.'

'So they took you all alive?'

'Yes. Though until I saw you stir a moment ago, I thought they'd done for you.'

'I don't know how they came upon us so fast. I swear to you, I kept a faithful watch.'

'Peace, friend. Whatever happens next, be sure that none of us blame you. The fissure was deeper than we realised, with more branches. They came at us from within the mountain, out of holes that looked like just more cracks in the rock. No man would have seen them, it was only when they carried us away that I saw how they could fit through gaps no one would have looked twice at.' He talked like a man anxious to settle his accounts while he still could. The Old Faith always held high the virtue of ridding yourself of as many burdens as possible before your soul went on its long, final journey.

'Maybe you should blame me.' Wulfcar said morosely. 'I was supposed to be your guide, and look at

where I've led us.'

'We were prepared for death the day we set out upon this journey. If we valued safety and nothing else we would have bowed before the king. Besides, we're not dead yet.'

'We may soon add that to our list of regrets.' Wulfcarr muttered, but then he realised that Halbeck was right: where there was life there was hope, however small a sliver of it there might be. It shouldn't have taken Halbeck to remind him of it either. He was supposed to be their guide, and he'd be no sort of man at all if he let fear un-man him now. 'Listen, forget that. Maybe there is nothing but doom awaiting us, but until we get there I won't give up. We can only trust to fate, now, and if it gives us a chance we must be ready to take it. Keep your eyes and ears open, and if I act, be ready to follow my lead.'

'I'm with you, whatever may come.' Halbeck confirmed. 'Don't worry: I wouldn't be here if I didn't have faith. There are powers greater than ourselves at work in the world, and they have goodwill towards us - especially at this time of year. A little faith can work wonders. Maybe you could do with some of it yourself.'

'Maybe so.' Wulfcarr muttered, as much to himself as to Halbeck. He'd never been much of a man for religion, beyond small offerings left at the wayfarers' shrines - but at this point, it couldn't hurt.

Down, down, down... deep into the dark they fell.

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Time was hard to measure out of sight of sun and stars, beyond the toll of the hour bells and the rooster's cry. It was hard for Wulfcarr to say how long the dwarves had been carrying them. More than an hour, less than a day, was the best estimate he could come up with.

The dwarves hadn't spoken a word in all that time. Their grotesque masks said everything that needed to be said.

At first the passageways they'd travelled through had clearly been natural; cracks split in the rock as mountain shifted under the weight of the glaciers above, and channels and caves carved by the drip, drip, drip of the implacable, incessant waters that flowed down from above. But gradually the scenery changed, and ragged rock gave way to cut and fitted stone. More time passed, marked only by the metronome-marching footsteps of the dwarves, and corridors built for two to walk side by side widened out and rose above their heads until they were walking through great halls that echoed like a temple. All of it totally hidden, deep beneath the mountain.

It was likely that no men had ever seen this sight before, but then again it was likely that any that did would never be able to tell another living soul.

The faint green glow that had lit the tunnels before had gone, but it had been replaced by a reddish tint to the darkness. And it was not just the backdrop that had changed. Wulfcarr was starting to see other dwarves. At first they were just shapes in the darkness, a flicker of movement there one moment and gone the next. But the deeper they went into the dwarven realm, the more he saw. In part, this was because it was brighter here. There was firelight coming from somewhere, though he could see no candles or braziers. In the half-light he saw dwarves passing by, some alone, some in groups, some striding purposefully and some almost dancing - skipping and hopping among their fellows like a mummer on the stage. Some drew back from the men that had been brought among them, and some ignored them, but none got closer. Some wore leathers and pointed hoods like their guards, but not all - some wore shaggy furs, like bears, and some wore coats of metal scales, and a few just had a cloak thrown over them and clasped at the collar.

They all wore masks. Each was individual to its owner, no two twisted faces were alike.

It was starting to get hot. The frost on Wulfcarr's beard was gone, and he was starting to get uncomfortable in his thick travelling coat. And then he saw why, and where the light was coming from. Forges lined the way, workshops with metal doors flung wide open onto the thoroughfare so that the heat was let out, and so all who passed could see the art performed therein. The first few were small, with only a dwarf or two each working at their bench or stoking the embers of their forge. But the workshops got bigger, and before long the pounding of metal on metal drowned out the footsteps of their captors, and Wulfcarr saw dwarves thronging around the forges and the anvils. Dwarves buried under layers of protective leather hammered and twisted, cut and chiselled, and stoked and pumped the flames until they rose up to the vaulted ceilings of their factories.

There was another sound, underneath the hammers. A whispering. A chattering. From behind those scowling masks, a clamour arose. The dwarves had seen that they had strangers in their midst, and some were starting to follow them - while still keeping their distance.

Wulfcar could make out much from the voices beyond their discontent, but he did manage to pick out a single word: 'Archon. Archon. Archon.'

They left the forges and factories behind, and came to a hallway greater than any they had yet seen, lined by buildings with strange and wonderous facades that were carved with all manner of fabled scenes. From alcoves high above, ranks of statues looked down upon them. They came to a great plaza and finally, finally after all that way, they stopped. His captors set him down, but first they were kind enough to turn him round to face whoever would pass judgement upon him.

He found himself looking up the steps of a great building, that rose to columns thicker than most houses built by men, that framed a great door inscribed with runes. A crowd formed, first filling out a rough circle around them, then filling to the far edges of the plaza as more and more dwarves flooded in to see what outrage had been perpetrated. Wulfcar and the others were still tied to the stretchers that had brought them here, utterly powerless.

The great doors swung open, making no sound save for the rush of air that issued from them. And through them stepped a black-robed dwarf with a snow-white mask set beneath his hood. He was flanked by more leather-armoured warriors, their pointed hoods adding perhaps another foot to their height. The black-robed dwarf came forward to the top of the steps, and the chatter from the crowd swelled, until...

'Svartalfar!' came the bellow from behind the mask. 'Silence, and heed your Archon!'

The hubbub stopped, cut off like a cleaver had just come down.

'Tell me now who calls upon me, and why!'

'Archon!' called out one of the guards that had carried them here. 'My brothers and I, we called upon you! We caught these trespassers within our realm, we bring them to you for judgement!'

Some small part of Wulfcar had been hoping that the tales about the dwarves had been exaggerated, but their hatred for outsiders was clear. He didn't think they could rely on any sympathy from the black-clad judge looking down on them, either. With renewed fervour, he returned to the task he'd been working on since he'd woken up: loosening his bonds. His captors had tied him tight, and they knew their work, but they hadn't accounted for the sweat now slick across his skin. With a little more wriggling, he might just be able to get an arm free.

'None may come into the home of another without an invitation.' called the Archon. 'That is the Law, as ancient as the very rocks themselves. If any among the Svartalfar extended hospitality to these outsiders, let them speak now, for the host-duty is an ancient law as well, and none may break it - even if they were wrong to offer it!'

The plaza was as silent as the grave. Wulfcar kept wriggling - his arm was coming up his sleeve, he just needed a little more space to get it out.

'Then the judgement is clear! They have trespassed upon our lands uninvited and unwanted, the only punishment for this is death!'

A cheer went up from the crowd, and laughter and scornful catcalls followed. In the periphery of his vision Wulfcar saw dwarves at the edges of the crowd gambolling and prancing, doing handstands and backflips, their grinning masks mocking him. Wulfcar ignored it; he didn't have time for them now. Someone from his party, maybe Lucien, was shouting for mercy, and one of the women was weeping. He ignored that too - nothing he could do for them if he couldn't get free. He glanced towards Halbeck, but the man's terrified eyes were fixed on the Archon and he couldn't get his attention. Wulfcar just hoped Halbeck would have the presence of mind to act if he managed to get them both free.

The Archon made a gesture and the noise cut off again. Then he signalled two of his bodyguards, who loosed the two-handed axes slung across their backs.

The executioners started advancing down the steps.

Wulfcar felt something give, and realised that his arm was now free - still inside his coat, but no longer pinned to his side by the ropes. None of the dwarves who'd captured them had noticed, their attention was still fixed on the Archon. He had a chance - a small chance, but if he got a weapon away from one of them maybe he could cut Halbeck free, cause some chaos and panic the crowd, then escape in the confusion. A slimmer hope there had never been, but it was all he had. As subtly as he could, he reached down and started tugging at the knots that tied him to the stretcher.

The axes glinted in the firelight. Their bearers were almost at the bottom of the steps, and Wulfcar had the horrible realisation that he wasn't going to do it in time. They hadn't noticed he was freeing himself yet, but there were too many knots, tied too tightly.

He wasn't going to make it. Another minute or two and he'd free himself, but it was a minute he didn't have.

He wished the crowd hadn't fallen silent, because all he could hear were his companions pleading for mercy, and the whimpering of the children. The last thing he'd ever hear would be the people he led to their doom.

Then suddenly, he realised he could hear something else...

Bells. He could hear bells. Not the heavy tones of a clocktower, or the fanfare peal of a temple. These were lighter, brighter... jollier...

Hoofbeats clattered on the flagstones, a whole choir of them. The mob of dwarves parted like corn before the wind, and through them charged a team of horses... no, not horses, reindeer. Reindeer pulling a huge, ornately-carved sleigh.

The sleigh came to a stop right in front of Wulfcar and the others, in-between them and the executioners. Then the large man in red at the reins stood up and threw back his fur-trimmed hood, revealing rosy cheeks and a full, white beard.

Holy heavens. It was Santa Claus.

'Svartalfheim!' Santa called out. 'I have come for my due. By the ancient oaths that bind us, I call on you to bring me your wares!'

Then he looked around.

'Oh. Have I come at a bad time?'

The dwarves shuffled their feet, but none of them said anything. It was clear that they didn't know quite how to react - which was exactly how Wulfcar felt.

'The solstice nears, the days grow shorter and shorter. There's not much time before I ride out across the world. My friends...' and here Santa turned just a touch peevish. 'I usually come around this time. Have done for centuries. I'm not sure why you all look so surprised to see me.'

The Archon finally spoke. 'Allfather, we are honoured by your presence, we just... have business to attend to. Business that will be concluded in a moment.'

'And what business is that.' Santa's brow furrowed. He looked from Wulfcar and his companions to the axe-bearers, and back again. Then he looked up at the Archon.

'Were you just about to kill these people?' he asked, a shade less jolly than he had been a moment ago.

'We were about to exact justice on these trespassers.' replied the Archon, but he was considerably less strident than he had been earlier.

'Justice? This is justice to you? Tell me, did these folk deliberately break into your halls, or did they just get lost in the night?' The dwarves looked at each other. 'Mm-hmm. I thought so. You propose to kill these people for the crime of losing their way. My friends, I have talked to you before about the virtues of compassion, and mercy. I know that you have largely failed to understand their value, but for my sake I had hoped that you would try to apply them anyway.'

'Allfather, we meant no disrespect...'

'Disrespect?' Santa's belly shook with fury. 'This is more than disrespect - to do such a thing, in this season of all seasons, is an insult to myself, and my work. Soon I will set out on my journey to bring the world joy at the coldest time of year, and on the very day I begin my preparations you **dare** ignore everything I've told you and dispense with charity and forgiveness in favour of murdering lost and helpless travellers!'

'But Allfather... the Law...' the Archon said plaintively.

'UNTIE THEM RIGHT THIS GODDAMN MINUTE OR I'LL SHOVE COAL SO FAR UP YOUR STOCKING YOU'LL BE COUGHING UP DIAMONDS!'

A dozen dwarves jumped forward almost reflexively and started hacking away at the ropes that bound Wulfcar and his companions.

'That's better. My naughty list is already long enough this year without adding half of Svartalfheim. Now, you are right that by your law they have trespassed, and by your law they must be punished. But I think that we can find a punishment that is both fitting under your laws and more in the spirit of the season. My friends, I propose that they be sentenced to banishment. Let them leave here, never to return!'

'That is... within the bounds of the Law.' the Archon grudgingly admitted.

'Good. And so it may not be said that I do not respect the laws of Svartalfheim, I will even enact this sentence myself. I will carry them away in my sleigh, so that they do not spend one moment more in

your halls than necessary, and take them far away as fast as my reindeer can fly. What say you?'

A somewhat uncertain cheer went up from the crowd, but it was a cheer nonetheless.

'Now, let's not forget why I came here. Don't you have something you should be doing?'

The crowd scattered, flowing back into the halls of the city. Only the Archon and his bodyguards remained, hovering nervously nearby, obviously too afraid to either leave their red-clad guest or approach him.

Santa turned to Wulfcar and his party. 'Come, my friends. Climb aboard my sleigh.' He reached down and picked up little Yelena, and with his free hand he helped Kuvo and Rafen climb aboard. The adults followed, with Wulfcar going last. The sleigh didn't look big enough for twelve, let alone twelve plus Santa, but it was surprisingly roomy once you were inside it.

'Santa, are you going to take us home now?' asked Yelena.

'I'll take you wherever you want to go child. Just as soon as the Svartalfar have fulfilled their obligations.' Santa answered, and opened his sack as dwarves began approaching, bearing offerings.

'Wait... the dwarves work for you?' asked Wulfcar. The dwarves were depositing gift-wrapped boxes in the sack at phenomenal speed, and it still showed no sign that it was getting full.

'You didn't think I could produce enough presents for the whole world with just the Alfar in my workshop at the North Pole, did you? I've been subcontracting for centuries, to these folk and others. The Svartalfar and I go back long before that anyway - they may be slightly antisocial, but they're peerless craftsmen. Our relationship has changed a lot over the years, but they're still bound to me by ancient oaths, and I to them.'

'I'm sorry if we... made things awkward for you.'

'Oh, they'll be extra grumpy for a bit, but they'll soon cheer up once I bring back all the milk and cookies. That's another task I can't do all by myself.' he winked. 'Besides, I learned to change with the times, it's no bad thing to remind them that they can too.'

'Thank you for saving us, Santa.' said Rafen, and threw his arms around him.

'Oh, my boy, how could I not? It is my duty and my pleasure to find the perfect gift for every child, and what is a greater gift than the gift of life? Without that, all the toys in the world are worthless, eh? Not that you won't be getting the toy as well in a few days time, don't worry.'

'You have my thanks too.' said Wulfcar. 'And I'm sure I speak for all of us. However we may serve you, whatever we can do to pay this debt, just name it.'

Santa shook his head. 'The only thing I'd ask of you is exactly what you're already doing: keep the old ways alive, and especially keep this season a time for love, and a time for giving.'

Wulfcar nodded. 'We'll keep the spirit with us always, in our hearts and in our deeds.'

Santa looked at him seriously. 'I do believe you will, Wulfcar, son of Hilmar, and the world will be better for it.' His face softened again, and he turned to the others. 'Now, where was it you wanted me to drop you?'

'I want to go home, I want to go home!' Yelena begged.

'Honey, honey.' Lila soothed her. 'It isn't safe, you know that. The king won't let us live there anymore.'

'But can't Santa talk to him and make him nice again?'

'I'm sorry, child.' Santa sighed. 'I can do many things, but the hearts of men - and Alfar come to that - are beyond my power to change.'

'Not to Fyrden, then, but you can take us out of the kingdom, across the mountains into Erania or Tyskmark?' Halbeck asked.

'Aye - that I can do.' Santa nodded. He cinched up his sack; it still didn't look full, but the last of the dwarves had presented their tribute. 'Dry your tears, child - there are a great many wonderful places in the world I can take you to, ones blessed with better rulers than your former home. If this is the end of something, it is only the end of a dark time, and the beginning of a new and better season.'

'Thank you.' said Neveras, holding Rafen close to him. 'Not just for our lives. After everything we've been through... we needed to hear that.'

'What am I here for?' Santa smiled at him. 'I am a reminder that every winter thaws, and every sun rises again, even after the blackest night. Now... away we go!' Santa took up the reins of his sleigh, and spurred the reindeer first to a trot, then to a canter, then to a thundering gallop. And before he was out of the plaza, he called back to the dwarves:

'Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!'

---- The End ----

