

# A Wander in Winterland

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With thanks to Ayla (curia\_regis) for beta-reading.



# Chapter 1

## A Wander in Winterland

A Primeval Short Story

### Primeval 100 Challenge 83 (Winter Wonderland): One of our Santas is Missing

“There he is,” shouted Ryan.

The missing Santa was sat in a snow drift opposite some sort of caveman.

They pelted towards him, the soldiers’ guns at the ready. The caveman eyed them warily and then backed off, stuffing bits of fur and stone into a leather bag.

“Come on, mate,” said Ryan. “Time to get you home.”

Dumbly, the Santa allowed them to drag him towards the anomaly.

“Where’s his hat?” asked Connor when they got there.

Ryan looked back over the ice field. The caveman was disappearing into the distance, a splash of red perched jauntily on head.

#### 1.1 A Wander in Winterland

The trader paused at the top of the ridge. It was nearing sunset and there was a cold wind but he wanted to consider the lie of the land while he had a good view. As a young man he’d never really appreciated how old age would slow him down, how his hefty spear would seem less and less reassuring as protection but would, nevertheless, serve well as a walking stick. In his youth he would have reached this valley long before dark, with time to spare if the settlement were no longer

there. He could see a curl of smoke from the trees that lined the valley floor, so today he was in luck; he would not be camping out alone. He started down the rough mountain side, quickly coming across a hunting trail that he followed with relief. Sooner or later it would take him to shelter and warmth.

In the fold of bear skin he had slung over his shoulder, he had a mixture of oddments. Decorative shells from the shore-side settlements, some coal, a couple of well made blades from a flint-knapper who was particularly skilled in his craft. In his youth he would have carried more, but back then, he had been stronger. These days he earned his food with stories and tales more often than he did by barter and exchange.

He was lucky, one of the older men remembered him from the last time he had passed this way. That meant he got food before a story was demanded, which always made the telling easier. He leaned back against a rock in the light of the cooking fire and gazed at the expectant faces around him.

“I shall tell you the story of the strange tribe I met in the cold lands. Now many won’t believe me, which hurts my pride because a trader lives by his reputation for honesty, but this story is as true as the day is long. It takes place many years ago when I was young, or at least younger than I am now. In those days I traded in furs, and there were settlements of people, out on the ice sheets, who caught the great bears and had remarkable skills in working their skins. This skin, right here, that I use to carry my wares was made by them. It is getting old now but you can see how supple it is and it has lasted a long time. In those days, I walked out into the cold lands in the winter months. It was hard and dangerous, but the smooth surface of the snow made it possible to drag a heavy weight behind you, so I could collect many skins on my trip and then drag them back. There was a small settlement by the great river and I brought my furs to it in the spring. Then I loaded them into hollowed out logs, which I got from the river folk, and traded them up and down the river. You could drag the logs along, you see, by floating them on the water and then walking along the bank. Again, it meant you could move more goods than you could transport on your own. There, I just gave away a trader’s trick, that’s how honest I am.

I generally exchanged furs for coal which some of the tribes along the river could collect from the ground and which was highly valued by the ice dwellers. But I also picked up well-knapped flint and other things where I could. Anything that would be of value to the ice-dwellers really. That’s the real skill of being a trader, spotting that something which is common place in one valley, will be sought after in another, be that the work of a skilled craftsman or some rock, like coal, that only appears in a few places. It may sound like a bit of a mug’s game,

all that heavy dragging and then the dangers of the ice and the river, but let me tell you, by the end of spring, I would have so much coal and flint and goodness knows what stashed away that I could sit around all summer eating honey-cakes on the proceeds, as we trader's say. I'd help out a bit harvesting fruit in the autumn, I didn't need to, but I like to be neighbourly, and then set out again when the first snows fell. That was the life, let me tell you, I made what's known as a tidy profit in the furs and coal trade.

"It was on just such a trip that I met a man from a new tribe. You can usually make a guess at a man's tribe from the way he dresses. You, for instance, keep your hair short, while the river folk wear it long and tied back with sinew. A bit fancy, the river-folk are, and I don't mind saying so, a little hoity-toity and precious. Yes, I thought that would make you laugh, but it's true. As I've said, I'm an honest man. Anyway, this man I met wore furs the like of which I had never seen. At first, I thought he must have trapped a beast with white fur and red skin, but skin that was incredibly thin. It had been shaped to his body with great skill, by means I could not detect. I have recently heard tell of a tribe who mix rabbit hair with water and make a new sort of fur by that means, which is softer and more flexible than animal skins. Maybe he did something similar.

"No matter, he was alone on the ice and had the bearing of a man who has lost his way. Now I could see what traders, like myself, refer to as a "business opportunity". However, these sorts of "first contact" situations are always a bit tricky. They don't know who you are. You don't know who they are. You're probably not going to speak the same language. Tricky! like I said. On the plus side, he didn't carry a spear and he didn't look aggressive. Some tribes will assume, automatically, that you are a threat which is always tiresome, not to mention dangerous. Anyway, I held out my hands, like this, and I sat down real slow. It's always a good thing to do, first time you meet someone new. It makes it clear you're harmless. If you sit down, they know you can't do anything sudden like, which reassures them and you're smaller than them, like a child, which makes you less threatening. I learned all this from my father. It's traders' lore.

"I tried talking to him, of course. I knew the tongues of most of the tribes in those parts, but without success. I hadn't really hoped for much, his style of dress was so different, I was sure he had come a long way and had not met any of the tribes I had.

"However, this was not the first time nor, let me tell you, was it the last, that I had to conduct a trade without words. So, putting my best foot forward and all that, I opened out my pack. That day, I carried flint knives and a few other trinkets. There was a young lass, not far from here, used to make beads you could string

on a bit of sinew and tie round your neck, or in your hair. They were very pretty and you could carry a vast number. I had left behind the big pack that I usually dragged behind me on the snow, because I was scouting out a new area and didn't want to be slowed down. So, I showed the man my wares and I pointed to his hat. I'd have taken every fur on him, if he'd have parted with them, but I've noticed people get a bit funny about trading away everything they're wearing, so I didn't push it.

"Anyway he seemed a bit slow to understand and even more nervous than people normally are, but he worked it out eventually and we traded the hat for a knife - though I had to show him what it was for and how to use it. I can't believe he'd never seen a knife though, unheard of that would be, so I sometimes wonder if he were a bit simple. He was quite elderly and sometimes the elderly aren't as razor sharp as they were in their youth.

"It was about this point that a whole load more of them showed up and these men were a different proposition altogether. Now, you know how someone looks when they're hunting something? They have a look of concentration in their eyes. You get good at recognising that look. Well, these men looked like that. There were four of them and three were obviously hunters. The fourth was a young lad, looked a bit inexperienced and excitable to me, he kept gabbling on and the others would roll their eyes. They all wore the same strange type of skins as the old man, though their skins were black not red. They weren't carrying spears, which was a relief, but they were carrying something else, short black sticks, and I didn't need to be a wise man to tell that they thought that the sticks were weapons.

"I was a bit nervous at this point. They had all the marks of a tribe that had been completely isolated somewhere; no language in common; little understanding of trade; ignorant and primitive basically. They also seemed to think I might be something of a threat from the way they brandished these sticks of theirs. It's not often you meet tribes like that. This was the only time, in fact, I've met a tribe that have never encountered a trader, but you hear the stories. The important thing is not to frighten them too much. Learning there are other humans in the world comes as a bit of a shock. They don't quite know how to react. You have to take things slowly and let them get accustomed to the idea. So I sat there quietly and didn't make any sudden moves nor do anything to alarm them.

"They grabbed the old man and there was a lot of shouting and then they set off back the way they came, watching me all the time. Once they were a safe distance away I got up, nice and slow, and then turned to go the other way. It's always a good idea not to be too pushy in these situations. I planned to go back the next day to see if I could find them, maybe show myself from a distance, let

them get used to the idea of me being around.

“But I never saw any member of that tribe again, and I looked many times. I wonder sometimes if they had travelled far out of their normal hunting grounds, for some reason, and were just passing through.

“Anyway, here is the hat. I’ve kept it with me ever since. It wasn’t very hard wearing, as you can see, so I’ve not worn it for several years now. It is beautiful though, and you can feel the softness of the hide that it’s made from and it makes a good tale in return for a place by the fire and a warm meal in my belly.”

The old trader sighed and closed his eyes, thinking for a moment of the vast snow fields. He’d moved away from the snow and the ice as his bones had got older and the wind had seemed more biting. In his memory, it was as beautiful and uncompromising and full of the strange and the unexpected like the undiscovered tribe with their fancy clothes and their ignorant ways.