

## **Lars-Ánte**

### ***This glimpse of hope inside of you***

**Interview dramatised by Ursula Rani Sarma**

I don't consider this a job. I am a reindeer herder because it is part of my culture. I was raised with it. My great, great, great, grandfathers were herders on both my mother's and father's side. Even our language is entwined with the animals. It serves a specific purpose in the forest. We have hundreds of words to describe different parts of nature so we can communicate with each other easily about where the reindeer are and how they are. Our ancestors, our language, our culture, the reindeer, they are all entwined. I spend my days with them and then dream about them at night. It all revolves around them.

The problem is now, the old ways of doing things, the knowledge you carry with you from generation to generation, it no longer has the same function because our reality is not the same. The weather is changing. The landscape is changing. We are trying to find new ways to survive.

Last year, we were about to separate our reindeers from the rest of the herd so we could begin to move them to the winter grazing lands. We managed to divide some of them but then this strange snow began to fall. It fell and fell, it seemed as though it would never stop falling. We couldn't move the rest of the reindeer so we had to make the decision to keep them together. This had never been done before; we have always separated them for their own best interests. So, we were in uncharted waters. We knew it was much more difficult to move large numbers in poor weather, to keep them together, to protect them. But we had no choice. We followed the herd as they searched for grazing past Abisko against the border to Norway and west against the Ruka border and into Norway – there we finally found pasture. But the rest of the herd that had already been separated out, they had moved elsewhere to find grazing and so when it came to the warmer months, we had no way of finding them. The whole herd had spread out and when we have tried to gather them, we could only collect a few hundred. We lost so many in the snow.

In recent years the reindeer sometimes can't find any pasture for grazing in the winter months at all. We have been powerless in the past, trying to help them to locate the food but if the weather is against us and there is too much ice or the wrong kind of snow, there is nothing we can do. We just have to watch them become weaker and weaker. If you catch them before the starving has gone too far then you have a chance of doing something but if it you are too late, then you can do nothing. It's terrible for us, we can't even look the reindeer in the eye while it's lying there because we know what is about to happen and we feel it too.

Traditionally, the reindeer and the herders depended on the land alone. We have come to realise that we now need to intervene. In these past years we have driven them hay and feed. We didn't want to put them in a pen so we started to feed them out in the forest because then they can continue to eat lichen from the trees in the older forests if they can and the ones who won't eat the feed can still continue to

forage. This is something that I haven't ever experienced ever, as a child or now. It is a totally different kind of reindeer herding and I feel like a beginner again. This isn't something that the older generations can advise us on.

We can't recognise the weather patterns any more. This summer it started raining and it never ended until the autumn arrived, then the rain turned to snow which meant there was no time when the ground wasn't wet or frozen. When the ground doesn't get enough time to dry and then you have snow, the reindeer can sense that there will be a risk of ice. Some people say that the ground itself starts to mould and the reindeer can feel that. They know that their usual grazing places would now take too much energy to find food so they avoid them. They stay in the mountains instead. The reindeers' traditional winter place is down in the forest, in the taiga, in the spruce and the pine forests. The mountain isn't usually a place where they would stay as the climate there is harsh, it takes more of a toll on their bodies. The landscape is tundra, very open surfaces. They have no protection from the elements.

In the beginning there was a kind of tranquillity to the landscape, the reindeer were not stressed. The landscape was not under pressure. But now, you can feel that all the wildlife is struggling. Back then, when I was in the forest there were so many birds flying everywhere. But today, there are far fewer to be seen in the air. Even the birds are in decline.

I don't know where it comes from. It may be because so much of the primeval forest has been cut down. There is such a small part left in Sweden now and the animals are grieving it. The nature can't cope without it. I know this isn't just a local phenomenon. Climate change is global. These people who live in these big cities, what can they know about nature? They live their whole lives in urban environments without ever seeing what is actually happening to the world. This is the problem, they are out of touch.

And it isn't only reindeer; it's everything in our nature. The number of animals is going to decrease drastically over time. For us if there are fewer and fewer reindeer, in the end there won't be anyone who can work with them. These animals are supposed to live in the fauna so they are directly affected by climate change, it's instant. If the number of reindeer decreases then a whole culture will go along with it.

We have so many different kinds of snow. There is appas that is totally untouched snow, and soaugni and wishki – these are where the reindeer have pastured a pit in the snow – and tscjono where there is a firm crust on the snow, and ritjni where there is snow on the trees, and jetnia which is snow ice, and syaplaha when the snow isn't cold enough to bear weight and then there issihnas, the powdery snow that is like rock salt. These are just a few.

We try to keep this glimpse of hope, this wish that next year will be better. You keep on hoping for the next year to be better but we know that with climate change things can never go back to the way they were. Hope alone is not enough, we must adapt to survive.