



SAANA RAMAEKERS

Northcross Intermediate

Junior International 2017 – 2nd

A HERD IN ISOLATION

Topic: Disappearing Languages

Coming to an isolated Sami community wasn't what Dr. Martyn Hendrix had originally planned for, but when the world needs saving, circumstances change. The Sami were the indigenous people of Northern Europe. Everything about them was unfamiliar to Martyn. The Sami people, their language, and their prized reindeer. Martyn's thoughts were interrupted by the movements outside the tent. The temporary tent used by the Sami was called a *lavvu*, Martyn reminded herself. This was just one of the words Martyn had learnt during her stay so far. However, a few specific words were not enough to be able to communicate properly with the Sami. Mostly, she used gestures and her expressions to talk to the others.

The Sami didn't have much idea what she was here for, but they were welcoming enough. Which was lucky, because Martyn could have been trying to force them into one of the ten main languages in the world. This had been tried before, by people who thought that the world would be better off without so much variety. Speaking a different language was called 'language inequality' nowadays, and Martyn had never cared much for that term. Difference does not mean inequality, she thought.

The morning was cool and crisp. People were already up and about, moving supplies and talking to each other in low voices. A few glances came Martyn's way, but not as many as when she had first arrived. Martyn felt the snow with her hands. It was cold, of course, but it didn't feel any different from yesterday. She straightened up and looked at the leader of the Sami group, the *boazoisit*, who was standing next to her. "*Luotkku*", she said. Lársa, the *boazoisit*, shook his head and pointed at the snow again. He bent down, and carefully lifted a clump of snow in his mittens. Lársa's mittens were made from reindeer hide, while Martyn's were made from special Nanotech fabric. Her mittens measured her current body heat temperature, and they warmed up and cooled down accordingly. All the clothes she owned did this - Martyn had not realised that such primitive materials like reindeer hide were still being used in isolated communities like the Sami herders.

Lársa motioned poking the clump of snow with his finger. Martyn touched the snow more slowly, and this time she felt a tiny layer of crusted snow break as her finger plunged into the cold. She could feel that the snow was a slightly different texture from the morning. Lársa pointed at the snow again and said the word "*skávvi*". The word for snow was no longer *luotkku*, it was *skávvi*. One tiny change, just a thin layer of crust and the description of snow was entirely different.

Martyn was coming to realise that this was the Sami language. Very detailed, and very complex. She had never been exposed to a different language before. Students in schools were required to learn the basics of the ten most widely spoken languages in the world. Everyone could connect to anyone, wasn't that a beauty? But this was also a beauty. A language so rich, so untouched by society. It was connected to the environment, and Mother Nature showed through every word.

Martyn looked into the distance, seeing reindeer grazing. The reindeer were always nearby. They were the Sami's property, of course, but they were not just belongings. The reindeer were special to the Sami. Martyn had been told that they had over a thousand words for describing reindeer. It was one of the only pieces of information that Martyn had learnt before coming to this small, isolated Sami community.

Reindeer were what defined the Sami. The beautiful creatures that now only lived under their protection. They only thrived with the Sami. And the Sami only thrived with the reindeer.

Martyn followed Lársa as he walked to where the reindeer had been herded just before. The reindeer ran in circles around the perimeter of their corral. Cream and brown coats blurred together. Hooves pounded, breaths were heavy, ankles clicked. Martyn felt that each hoof beat left an imprint on her heart. Next to Martyn, Lársa caught her attention. He mimed eating, and then looked at his watch. The strap was made from reindeer hide, presumably. Martyn didn't often like to wear a watch, but when she did it was a temporary tattoo watch that was printed on her wrist. She was glad she wasn't wearing one now - it would have seemed out of place here.

Martyn guessed that Lársa was signalling that it was time to eat. She headed towards the corral gate, when Lársa stopped her. He signalled toward the reindeer, and mimed cutting off a head. This was a game of charades. One would gesture, the other would guess. Problem was, no-one would know if someone's guess was incorrect. Suddenly it registered with Martyn what Lársa was meaning. Surely, he didn't mean to kill one? Martyn knew where meat came from, of course, but it was just so different to what she was used to. Food outside of these isolated communities were prepared in sanitized factories full of drones and robot workers. Even these

factories that slaughtered genetically modified animals were starting to shut down, in favour of new technologies. Soon, in only a few years perhaps, these food preparation factories would be completely shut down, replaced by labs making food that was entirely genetically grown.

Lársa now had a reindeer by a strap around its neck. He led the reindeer out of the corral and around to a shed off to the side. From his bag he took out a knife. In one swift movement, he shot out his left hand to grab the reindeer's antler. Before the reindeer had time to react, the knife slashed through its skin. Lársa, still gripping the now-dead reindeer's antlers, let the body fall over sideways. It hit the ground with a crunch. Blood flowed out of the slit neck, staining the white snow with thick, dark red.

Martyn watched in horror, repulsed by the scene before her. She walked slowly back to the corral, leaving Lársa behind with the dead animal. Her breath came out in heavy puffs of steam. Martyn watched the herders at their work for over an hour, wondering how the Sami could kill what was so obviously dear to them.

Martyn soon started to read the Sami's expressions to know what they were saying. Little jerks of their heads. She learnt that above all, a smile meant the same thing in both her language and their language. She passively observed the group as they finished up a day's work and headed back to where the *lavvu* were.

Noticing that Lársa was still not with them, she broke off and headed back to the shed. Martyn peered around the corner, afraid of what she would see. Sure enough, a skinned reindeer hung from the side of the shed, red and raw. Below, there was a bucket. As Martyn drew closer, the stench of iron reached her nostrils. The bucket was filled with blood. Martyn didn't want to think about how they used the blood. Perhaps to eat? The idea made her shudder.

Around Martyn at dinner, the others chatted merrily. Sounds of warmth, laughter, and family filled the air. The Sami ate heartily, a meal of mushroom soup and bread and what Martyn now recognised as reindeer meat. After they had finished eating, the group began to sing songs that Martyn could only translate into emotions. Feelings of love, hope, and grief.

The spirit of the Sami was an ancient sense of needing nature, and nature needing people. These humans were part of a beautiful tradition, one that should never die out. True, they killed their own animals. But where else were they going to get their food from? They had become completely self-sufficient, isolated from a world where everyone could understand anyone. The Sami were unique, the Sami were special. The Sami were different.

"Good morning, Dr. Martyn Hendrix. Today will be a day in which you will achieve your goals." Martyn's CommuWall2056 woke her with the usual morning buzz. Martyn changed into her work suit, and shovelled down some breakfast. A breakfast that had been genetically grown in a lab. As Dr. Martyn prepared to hop out the door into a travel pod, she glanced at her wrist and realised that she had forgotten to put her watch on. She walked back to her room and looked at her bedside table. On it sat the only item in the room that was out of place with the sleek white furniture.

Martyn held her watch strap up to her nose. She breathed in deeply, and the smell of reindeer hide encompassed her senses. It brought back memories from years ago, memories of skinned reindeer and corrals and songs around a fire. Lársa's watch was the only relic left of the ancient Sami people, their language, and their prized reindeer.