



Author's Note

Thirty-five thousand years ago, in the forest and mammoth steppe of Central Europe — before humans domesticated animals, before written words and static settlements — an event occurred that advanced humans into the next phase of evolution: the greatest change since fire. There are countless theories about how, when and why this happened, but the centuries are muddled, and it is impossible to say. This is the way I imagine it, my journey to that moment.

As archaeologist and geneticist Greger Larson said, “*The only way to know for sure is to go back in time.*”

We Wolves

We are silence. We are silence in grass, in light of grey. We are cold in wind — whispering leaves, rattling branches, ruffling lark in nest, licking fur on cheeks. Wind is against us. Go through wind, through grass, through moss on earth, on stone, on bone. Step past bracken, too loud under paw.

Stop. Night is new, smells of day, last birds call, trees wave. Nose to earth, to hoof-mark in mud: hoof on leg, joined to muscle, pumped by blood, through heart, through chest. Here an hour ago, a buck with herd, antlers unripe — hoof hurt, bone twisted.

We flow through trees, beneath boughs — mate is here, father of pups, son and daughter run close. Bat cries pierce ears. Bear lumbers far away.

Stop. Edge of woods, end of trees. Endless grass grows bright under moonlight. A musk of deer: crunch of grass, tear of willow, grind of teeth. We smell buck. We smell him raise chin and look to woods. Wind wafts from him to us; he smells nothing.

Flick tail to buck: he is hunt, he is life. Mate acknowledges, bows his head. We leave cover, sink in grass, edge towards herd. Mate encircles left, son and daughter right.

Watch.

Fear enters scent. We are here. Son bounds past doe, snaps to buck; buck turns, meets daughter, leaps past — we follow, between deer, between hoofs flailing, fear wailing. Buck keeps with doe, but we snap, ring, push. We steer him to woods, but he does not go, bounds deeper into field.

We smell rhino.

Rhino chews willow, wool trailing in grass, ears pricked in alarm. We keep to buck's sides, keep from hoof, antler, steer him closer. Wind turns; rhino smells, stamps warning. We speed, as buck tries to break. We come close; rhino charges, horn swiping, swishing. We scatter into night, but

buck is slow; swipe catches shoulder. Rhino steers away. Buck stutters, crumples: bad-hoof twists, blood-scent gushes.

Before buck rises, we are here. Son's teeth in leg, daughter's bite in belly. Buck writhes, buck leaks: life leaks. We smell beating heart — ease through flesh, through breaking bone, to warmth and wet; buck screams as teeth sink deep. Panic wild, grip tight. Buck struggles, thrashes, kicks — lame leg in jaws. Buck's heart is all we hear, echoing in bones, in hoofs, in antlers: slipping away. Limpness comes, struggle stops. Teeth tear belly, pain fades away: buck fills with night.

Taste heart. Taste liver: hot, sucking, twitching. Mate feasts, bone-crunch, flesh-rip, life in blood, in belly. When full, we draw back, buck in teeth. Son comes forwards, daughter waits; when son is done, she sinks teeth in stomach.

Buck is stripped. Scent is gone. We raise mouths — we sing. Sing to meat, to wind, to sky, to tree: sing to home. Our song echoes back, from sister's mouth. We are silence, padding through bat-filled trees; to where earth is our scent, river our blood, hill our bones. Sister waits. Her fur is soft as she shows belly. Son gives her buck-leg carried in mouth.

Little son bounds, yips, nuzzles paws. He smells of blood and milk, smells of little daughter, and last little son born forever silent. Little son nips lips, smiles tail. Mouth meets his, brings up buck, from tongue to tongue, mother to son.



Taste sweetness from mother's mouth.

Nip mother for more, but meat is gone: belly is full.

Follow mother to family. Nuzzle father's paw, chew sister's nose. Big brother bites ear. Aunt carries us away in softness of mouth, to rest under earth, buck running in belly.

Nights turn, in bones, in days, in muscle stretching, fur thickening, meat eaten, milk pushed away; in bounding legs, beating earth, sleeping heart on heart, in curl of blood and fur.

We run. We flow through snow from branch on earth. Legs move in strength, tails swooshing, wood breathing, father, brother, sister. Breathe mother's absence away in earth, new brother and sister in belly.

We need meat for unborn, for fur yet to grow. Father leads to edge of woods, to bare steppe. We follow scent of deer, find herd lapping water running through grass. The scent we need is fawns fresh with milk, the meat mother wants for un-singing ones.

We are silence. We are silence in grass, in circling wind. Shadows in shrub, cast by slit of moon. Deer do not sense us. We creep close. Musk is thick, consuming: teeth hurt, bellies growl. Wait.

Old buck lifts nose — sniffs.

Nothing. Lowers head.

Wind changes. Our scent rushes to herd — ears up, eyes white, hoofs stamping. We move in, but deer swirl, clatter; does shield fawns.

We weave through limbs, but bellows deafen, buck kicks — antler bites belly.

Fall.

Where are we? Father? Brother? Sister? Belly punctured, wound deep; life seeping out. Blood in fur, sky spinning, earth echoing. Deer clashing, deer screaming, trampling legs, chest. Hoof crushes tail.

Red. Heat splatters snow, but from another heart. Deer falls. Tree grows from its chest.

Tree?

Sounds. Father cries, hoofs crack, lone bird chitters.

Sniff — others are here.

Creatures move, steps loud, breath hard, darting between deer. Smell of brother lunging, pushed back by swirling limbs, legs, danger. Brother turns, runs. Brother and sister keep close to father as they vanish into trees.

We are gone.

I am alone.

Deer disappear. Air quiets. A shape moves past, bends, puts claw on fallen deer. Life leaks in earth. Shape stands, heavy on back legs, spine straight, stone-claw in paw. I do not know his scent. Try to stand, but things shift, convulse — fall.

Eyes watch. More creatures, standing, staring. Paws hold thin trees, sharp. One comes close, muscles bend, sees blood in fur. He studies, puts paws to wound, looks for life.

Growl.

He raises paws. I see fur, close to his skin, yet apart. Ears unseen, nose small.

Other creature barks. First one steps back. He pauses, gazes. Stone-claw hangs at hip. He bows, joins pack. They raise deer on shoulders — vanish into trees.

Night broadens. Stars light sky. Nose filled with blood, pain. I summon bones, stand, sway; stay steady. I raise mouth — I sing

Listen. Wait.

Sing.

Listen. Wait.

I drag legs, drag tail, out from open, into trees. Lean on trunk. Sniff, smell. Raise paw, scratch snout. Sniff, smell. Wander on.

Stop. Father's scent on log. Sniff. Follow. Go slow, slower than wish — pain is creeping.

Hardness hits head. Stumble. Tree, not there before: brought low by wind. Move around, keep going. Scent? Where is scent?

Sing to sky, to light of night.

Listen. Wait.

There. Faint, on edge of ears, family sings of home. I follow, between trees, over stones, through thorns. Sing. Keep going. Sing.

Path wavers. Scents appear, disappear. Family-song rises — fades. Legs give way. I collapse on earth.

Eyes fall shut.

Wind is in me. Night fades into dawn. Earth is cold and hard and old. I try to move, but bones resist. Without raising mouth, I sing.

Silence.

Dark diminishes. Force myself to paws, to legs, to breath. Smell, taste, see — move, pad, breathe.

Smell. Nose twitches. Something. I edge closer, cautious, unsteady. Not our scent. Keep going, close, closer. Surety grows — unease. These trees, this earth, this stone — not ours. Another pack, another territory. Not home. I look back. Will I find mother? Will I smell unborn?

Hunger rakes sides, scolds deeper than aunt ever did. Wind wafts strong scent: meat, flesh, life. I follow scent, into land not ours. Paws fill with ice, head throbs, blood trickles grass, but I go on.

Stop. Stone-claws sit together. Brightness lies between them, brighter than moon or sun, rising, falling, warmth spilling out. Smell deer as they eat, chew, swallow, ingest.

Sniff. Lick lips. Belly whimpers. Their scent is danger: not prey, but rival, to avoid, not confront. Watch. Life leaks from my edges, goes with night, fades in amber sky.

I step closer. I am silence, but I do not hide. Another step. Another.

Stone-claw straightens — sniffs. Others see, turn from brightness. I am still. Eyes watch me, watch trees, for family, for pack. I am alone.

Against instinct, go closer. Neck bent, head low. Stone-claw stands on back legs.

I am still.

All is still.

I know his scent. He knows mine. He holds meat in paw, tosses through air; lands at my feet.

Teeth are in it — it is in throat, in belly, in bones, in heart.

Stone-claws watch. Feeder sits, eyes on me: brightness crackles.

A moment.

I stand. Ease forwards. Stop. Wait. Move close. They are still, as I come to brightness, sink to paws, chin on earth, alert for motion.

Feeder bends. Hackles rise. He raises meat, offers from paw. It is gone in rush of tongue and teeth and lips.

Warmth overtakes me. Brightness flickers, runs in place, covering fur, skin, soul. Shivering quiets.

Feeder moves — touches my neck.

My teeth grip his paw. I do not pierce skin. My eyes meet his eyes. He is still.

Others stand. Brightness cracks.

Nothing moves.

I let go, lay on ground. Roll on side, show softness of belly. Others ease, bend legs, watch. I am still, as feeder brushes fingers through my fur. Touch is light — like mother's tongue.

Sun rises. Eyes close. I feel grass and warmth, hear trees sway, birds waking to another day. I lie, breathe, feel tender stroke of feeder's paw.

I sense the world shift, as scent of he and scent of me, blurs into we.