

DINGO DREAMING

The dingo was still running along, running along, coming straight through this way. He ran this way, this way. There he is, still running this way. He belongs to our side. (Joe Jangala. 'Malikijarrakurlu')

Warrigal looked at the two young dingoes who were leaning forward on their front paws, eager to start the race down the mountain. "Go now, while the light holds. It will be dark when you reach the farm."

Immediately they hurled themselves downwards at a tremendous pace, careless of their safety or the scattering rocks which flew out from under their paws. Merrigal kept her mind open and uncluttered, free of the usual dingo thoughts, ready to somehow change into human shape for the first time if she needed to. Braveheart's head sang with words: 'Help us, our Dreaming is dying. Help us, our Dreaming is dying.'"

The steepness of the mountain allowed them to continue their headlong rush and long after their breath had given out, they still threw themselves downwards, their large paws scrabbling on stones which skidded away from under them, their legs wrenched on holes between the rocks, while their lungs, unable to keep up with the pace of their bodies, struggled to breathe in great shuddering gulps of air. Braveheart was vaguely aware that he felt sick with the continuous effort of running. His claws, which he usually drew in to protect their sharpness, were pushed out to aid his grip. His eyes bulged with the effort of

staring as he tried to pick a way around the dark rocks in the fading light and deceptive shadows of evening time.

At last they reached a lower part which wasn't so steep. There was more space between the rocks, the ground was softer and the moon began to rise over the skyline. The dingoes stopped and looked at paddocks, a shed and a farmhouse. They lifted their noses and sniffed wood smoke, dog, humans, and strongest of all, a pungent smell of something warm and damp. Braveheart looked at Merrigal; these were the sheep he'd heard about but never seen or smelt before. Here was the cause of all the trouble between men and dingoes. Before the introduction of sheep, dingoes might spend the whole day catching a small wallaby or a bandicoot. They must work together for hours chasing a kangaroo which ran faster than them and which had to be hunted strategically using ambush and relay tactics. Sometimes a cornered kangaroo would fight back, inflicting deadly wounds with his powerful clawed feet. Slow old dingoes with blunt teeth and poor eyesight could barely survive. Now these old fellows sought out an easy diet of tender mutton, there for the taking, because the sheep did nothing to save themselves. In fact they helped the dingoes, obligingly herding themselves into a woolly mass.

The two young dingoes stopped when they reached the bottom of the mountain and trotted forward at a slower pace, their breath sobbing and ragged in their throats. A creek crossed their path and they waded in, drinking the clear water and cooling their bodies. Then they crouched in some long grass at the edge of the farm and watched the strange fluffy creatures in the paddocks. The sheep picked up the scent of the hidden dingoes.

They began to jostle and paw the ground. Some spoke in their harsh foreign voices; the low guttural ‘baaah, baah’ and others, beginning to panic, called out in a high pitched and long drawn out ‘maaaaaah.’

Braveheart turned his head towards the noise and his body stiffened. The flock’s helpless panic called out an appeal to his ruthless hunting instincts. ‘Chase us, hurt us, kill us,’ they were saying. But Merrigal moved to an empty part of the paddock away from the mass of sheep and Braveheart was obliged to follow her. Merrigal looked around, then slid under the lower rails of the paddock, taking a short cut directly to the farmhouse. Braveheart would have given much to turn and trot back up the mountain, but instead he crouched down and followed her under the rails. They were halfway through the paddock before the sheep erupted into a frenzy of crazy panic. Instead of staying together at the far end of the paddock, so that the dingoes could trot quickly towards the house, the sheep began to move. Braveheart was reminded of the wind on native grass; each sheep like a blade moving as one, swelling and billowing, sinking and rising. Then the sheep stampeded, running into each other and on top of each other, all struggling to reach the centre of the woolly mass. A small group broke away from the main flock and galloped towards the very source of their terror—the two dingoes.

‘Stupid animals’ thought Braveheart, bracing his body as the panicking mass thundered towards him. He turned to try and dodge them and continue his journey towards the farmhouse, but one large sheep ran into him and knocked him to the ground. She was heavier than she looked, not at all the light fluffy thing he’d expected. Braveheart fell

heavily and before he could struggle up, the big sheep ran over him, her sharp hooves, digging painfully into the soft flesh of his belly. At first Braveheart felt angry but when he smelt her damp fleece soaked in urine he became excited. As she trampled him he twisted his body and snapped up at her, then spat out a mouthful of greasy fleece. He struggled to his feet just as another sheep ran towards him. This time he sank his teeth in deeper, through the fleece and the soft skin and bit into the tender flesh. The sheep screamed and jumped away. At the same moment Braveheart dug his paws into the ground and pulled back until a chunk of juicy flesh filled his mouth.

So this was what all the fuss was about. This was why the humans were so anxious to keep their sheep for themselves! He tasted the meat in his mouth. Not as good as the prey he was used to. But so easy to come by! He swallowed the chunk of meat; the blood ran down his throat and a red mist formed before his eyes. The exhilaration of the hunt overcame him; the excitement of cruelty and power, his domination of the ignorant domestic animals, the sweet taste of easy prey. As he turned to attack another sheep, something bit him hard on his neck. Then he heard a loud noise, a bang which hurt his ears. The bite was from Merrigal who followed it up with a violent shoulder shove. The bang was louder than a crack of thunder or the thud of a great tree falling to the ground. He sniffed the acrid smell of gunpowder and saw the rifle in the hands of a human—a grown man.

‘The death man’ he thought, ‘the dingo killer.’ He saw another gun held by a smaller human. ‘A boy; a grown pup like me. The shapechanger.’

From the corner of his eye he was aware of Merrigal moving fast, streaking away from the gun, running away. Braveheart stared at the rifle, then he looked at the boy whose eyes were as dark as the tree shapes they had encountered on the crazy run down the mountain. Braveheart's eyes were golden as the sun at dusk, just before it changes to red.

'Don't shoot me' he pleaded with his golden eyes. 'Let me live.' He watched the boy with the intensity of one whose life is about to end. 'Don't shoot. Don't kill me.'

The feelings of the boy showed clearly on his face as they gazed at each other. First there was a determination to shoot, then came doubt, then some hesitation and finally, oh joy, a moment of complete understanding and sympathy. The boy raised his rifle and took aim and for a moment Braveheart was afraid that he'd misread the signs on the boy's face. But the boy continued to gaze at Braveheart and his eyes were now gentle and understanding and kindly. He fired and Braveheart ran after Merrigal, away from the farm, back up the mountain, knowing that the shot would miss him.

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Warrigal lay in the morning sun; "Tell me again about the boy—the son of the dingo killer."

Braveheart told him again about the boy who'd fired at him and missed, how they'd stared into each others eyes; how the boy had read his thoughts: "*Don't shoot; I want to live,*" and how he'd read the boys' thoughts.

"What did the boy tell you?" asked Warrigal and for the first time Braveheart knew what the boy had told him with his eyes: "*I can't kill you. Killing you would be like killing myself.*"

"Aah!" sighed Warrigal. "He must be the one. He has to be the one."

"The one for what, father?" asked Merrigal. Only Braveheart knew that she'd run away from the guns without even trying to change her shape.

Warrigal said "I think he's the one who'll give us back our place in the Dreaming. The new humans are ignorant of the dingo inside them but this one knows. He'll stop the killings and the hatred. I don't yet know how. But yes, I'm sure. He's the one."

That night Merrigal and Braveheart made another journey to the farm.

It was Merrigal who trod on the trap. It had been positioned with great cunning and at first Braveheart couldn't understand what had happened. One minute they were running along, healthy and fit; the next moment he heard a snap, then a noise which sounded like 'Wrrmph' and looking back he saw Merrigal's body arching into the air.

She screamed, and each time she jerked her leg to try and pull it free, she screamed again. Braveheart had been running a little ahead of Merrigal and he quickly ran back to her. He stared at the trap; Merrigal's pulling had dragged it out of the dirt and he could clearly see the iron jaws, cruelly serrated so they cut into her leg bone. Blood ran from the wound and matted her fur, and she pulled and screamed, pulled and screamed in a frenzy of fear and pain. Then Braveheart felt the same sort of fear and anguish and he raced round and round Merrigal in a tight circle. He banged his body against the wire fence which had forced them towards the trap and as he ran he howled out a terrible wail of rage and pity. Then the man Barker cursed himself for not having the foresight to set two traps in the corridor. If there'd been another trap buried close by, Braveheart would certainly have stepped on it.

The two humans, father and son came out from the shadow of a nearby tree and the older one raised his gun. Braveheart quickly ran further up the path, out of range but almost mad with frustration and misery. He turned to watch. The boy carried a big piece of wood, smoothed down at one end like a club. The older man put down his gun and took the club from the boy. He approached the trap with the club raised high above his head. When Braveheart heard shouting and the sound of the club hitting something soft, he ran towards Merrigal. His lips were drawn back from his teeth, and a fierce snarling noise came from deep in his throat as he prepared to die fighting the men.

He leapt at the boy who was bending over Merrigal, but even as he jumped, the boy turned to look at him. The dark eyes with the flecks like granite were staring into Braveheart's golden eyes.

'Don't hurt me' the boy's voice sounded in Braveheart's head. 'I'm helping your friend.' And then Braveheart looked again and saw that the older man lay on the ground. It was the man who'd been hit with the club, not Merrigal. Now the boy was pressing on the metal plate with his foot, trying to release Merrigal's poor crushed leg from the jaws of the trap. The boy was talking to Merrigal and the words filtered through her pain and panic and Braveheart too was able to catch their meaning: "Lie still or you'll hurt yourself more. I'll soon get your foot out of this. Don't worry about the man. He can't hurt you now."

But the man who hated dingoes was groaning and trying to sit up and Merrigal was still screaming and struggling, snapping viciously at the boy's hand and arching her body in agony. She couldn't seem to understand that the boy was trying to help her. Her brain automatically processed his words and passed their meaning on to Braveheart but she seemed unable to act on the boy's instructions. The boy was pressing his foot down on the metal plate which kept the jaws of the trap closed and preparing to ease out her paw, but the plate was slippery with blood. As the boy bent to help her, Merrigal leaped up as far as she could and bit his hand. The boy flinched and shifted his weight; the metal plate slipped from under his foot and the jaws snapped shut again. Now Merrigal screamed in a

voice which was dreadful to hear. The sound over-rode the boy's sobbing apology and Braveheart's howls of fear and sympathy.

The boy pressed on the plate again and suddenly everything changed. Merrigal stopped screaming and bent over her foot, easing it out of the trap with her own slim brown hands, then leaning on the boy's arm and limping forward as a human girl. But the man was sitting up and rubbing his head and slowly feeling around for his rifle. Braveheart blinked as the human girl changed back into dingo shape and began to run on all fours. As Braveheart ran to join her, the boy stood staring, uncertain what to do and the man began to call out in a harsh angry voice "Gideon, Gideon."

Merrigal and Braveheart turned back and in one fluid sweep of their bodies, they caught the boy up, pressing their flanks on either side of his body, calling to him without words to run. And he began to run, the weight of their two dingo bodies pushing warmth into his shivering legs. As the dingo killer began to stagger after them, the boy tried to yell out something, but the only sound which reached the air was the now desperate shouts of the man; "Gideon, Gideon, Come back."

But Gideon ran on with his two companions, dropping on to all fours and pressing closer to their flanks, until he seemed to melt into their bones, to think their thoughts, to breathe the same panting gulps of air and move with the same long strides, touching the ground lightly with his paws.