

The Last Stripe – Ariana, Year 5, VIC

Tasmania: September, 1936

Only the Two-Legs are worse than hunger. They had taken everything; my friends, my family, even the food. Long ago, they say, the Two-Legs were different; they did not kill for pleasure, and took only what they needed. Not like these. These wore strange smelling pelts from head to foot, as if afraid to show their true selves. And they had the bang sticks that spat fire and roared death.

They created the death spaces: squares of grass, ringed with straight, branchless trees that grew only cold-scented vines of metal, each studded with hide-tearing spikes. Inside, there was nothing, no cover, no prey. Only strange, fat, baaing creatures with cloud-fluffy coats; the Two-Legs' flock.

We learned to live lean. I could get by with a bandicoot or a possum if things were desperate, but even they were impossible to find now. Bandicoots and possums need trees, and the forests which had stood through a thousand storms were felled or burnt to make death places like this one. Now I was beyond desperate. I needed much more than a possum.

I stared up at the metal vines. Here, all my kin had fallen to the Two-Legs' bang sticks, even him. The flock was just on the other side. I arched my stripe-covered back, preparing to make the leap, but I scented something - it was the Two-Legs!

Quickly, I turned tail and crouched behind a bush, the Two-Legs would never scent me, they scented nothing. I heard them:

"Flock's safe now mate?"

"Yeah, I reckon. They say the last one's in the zoo, not going to last long by the looks..."

"Yeah? Then I say good riddance to 'em!"

I tried to process what this meant, but my stomach roared and I needed food.

Swiftly, I leapt, flying over wire and wood, landing on the other side, the soft springy grass cushioning my paws. The fluff-baas were in the far corner, and they had not scented me. I prowled over and spotted two of them that had broken from the herd to graze on fresher grass. As I prepared to leap out from the small cluster of shrubs that hid me, my eyes fell upon the young one. It stood, huddled against its unwatchful mother, gently nuzzling her and making soft, contented bleating noises. This didn't feel right. These creatures had never learned fear or caution, they didn't even act like prey.

My ears suddenly pricked as, from not far behind me, I heard the click of a bang stick. Instincts took over and I bolted, the roar and heat of the bang stick flattening my fur as it passed my shoulder. Bounding over the wood, my ears ringing, I made a desperate dash for the safety of the forest. More banging, and invisible claws splintering wood behind me, as I vanished into the tree line. Just as I began to slow my pace and calm my ragged breathing, I heard their loud, clumsy footsteps. They were coming.

I swerved through the trees, trying to determine what they had meant, and then it hit me, lightening-sudden - he was alive. Captured, but alive! Taken, across the Two-Legs' hard, black river. Now all I cared for was finding him, and if that meant crossing the black river, I would do it. First though, I would have to lose these Two-Legs. Luckily, the black river was the one place they would never expect me to go. I approached, and a shiver shot through me as I remembered how many creatures - predator and prey - had been hit by the Two-Legs' wheel boxes.

That wouldn't happen to me - unlike them, I had something waiting for me on the other side, I had my mate! I took a step forward, then leapt back as a wheel box hurtled by, narrowly missing me. More cautiously this time, I started to slink across. I was half-way when another wheel box came rushing at me. I made a last rush and barely escaped; my paws happy to be back on the soft, mossy earth.

The sky was dark as I crept closer, in my snout, the same smell as in the death place. I sniffed the air once, twice, hunting for the Two-Legs' odour, but found nothing. Using all my strength, I bounded over the tall, towering gate, following my mate's spoor.

As I tracked it, many different scents began to flood my nostrils. I tried to unravel the smells, to find the unmistakable essence of my mate; but all spoke only of loneliness, despair and longing. Relying on my ears and eyes, I made my way through the maze of sorrow.

The first thing I found was a grey goshawk, feathers once ghost white and gleaming, now dull with despair and decay. There was no sky for this one, no trees to dive between, no rushing wind or squealing prey, just a cold, dark cage, hooding his view even of the few streaks of sunshine that remained. At the next cage and the next, the scene was no different, all of them prisons for creatures with no hope, no belonging, lost; their true spirits buried under a sea of sadness, singing their grief to the stars.

I too felt like I was drowning in an ocean of despair until I saw a familiar tail, a distinct black-striped tan. With new hope, I trotted over to a lonely, isolated enclosure. He too had the ending smell in him, and I realised this wasn't hello, this was goodbye. Reaching my paw through, I gave him a gentle nudge, but he made no response. Despair began to cloud my mind once again, he couldn't have forgotten me, could he? No! I refused to believe it, but despite my continuous nudging, he did not stir.

I lifted my muzzle to the sky and began to bark. Then I lay down and curled into a tight ball, my eyes constantly staring at the cage. Slowly, he began to rise, gazing at me, love in his eyes. He sniffed my belly, tenderly rubbing his head against me. He lowered himself back down, and I knew it was time to go.

I leapt back over the gate, barely clearing it. Then I began to run, loping back to the heart of the forest, to a den so secret no Two-Legs would ever find it. My belly sagging as I lay down. I heard my mate howl for the last time. A howl not of loneliness or despair, but of triumph, because he was not the last, because our young would live!