

## Boy Scouts

Andrew hated sitting at the front of the bus, he recoiled as it bounced over the uneven trail, causing his gut to convulse. With each and every bump, the ponding in his head grew, as did his embarrassment. He leant low over his bucket; he could feel a pulsating sensation at the back of his throat. Leaning against the window, he trailed his finger along the glass, catching sight of the wild creatures that made their way through the undergrowth.

The bus lurches, and his stomach drops. At his back, he can hear the boys crawling around like monkeys; picking at each other's hair searching for flees. Andrew groans heavily, trying to block out everything as he closes his eyes, his ears beginning to ring, as the monkeys continue to preen and dance. Andrew breathes in deeply, feeling his stomach bounce around like a basketball; he steadies himself, reaching for his bucket.

Andrew hands reach for the armrests, digging into it; Andrew is *not* going to throw up this time. No way. Not after he spent all three weeks at drama camp last year being known as Pukey Johnson after hurling on the trip in when they went round a particularly tight bend. As if drama camp isn't bad enough on its own.

So, he takes another deep breath. He's just got to keep it together for another twenty kilometres.

The bus judders.

Andrew's stomach twists.

He takes another breath.

A few rows back, the other boys have all joined in singing *Wheels on the Bus*, screaming at the top of their lungs. Unsurprisingly, piercing, off-tune yelling isn't settling his guts any.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round!"

It was piercing through his ears causing a ringing sound to echo, and the bus continued to crash over the ground, bumping over logs and pivoting left and right as it raced around the tight corners.

These sudden motions had him gripping the bucket tighter, as the bus begins to ascend.

He was thrown back into his seat, his eyes drifting lazily through the window; all he can see is a haze of green, brown and gold. The trees shift in wave-like motions, cutting through the misty clouds. As he twists back into his seat, he returns his gaze to what's ahead of him, a twisting road that spins wildly into the undergrowth. He tries to focus on the road, but all he can see is a red, sweaty face peering over his shoulder, a boy that threw him into a dumpster earlier in the school year.

It stunk like rotten eggs and it took all day to wash out the stink.

Andrew wipes at his brow, which is slick with sweat.

As the bus plunges downwards, Andrew feels his stomach hover for half a second, dropping down into his seat as the sun washes over his eyes; he raises a hand to block out the rays. A second later the light vanishes and he looks down at the road, long, pitted and overladen with logs and gravel, "Come on, you've to be kidding me!"

The boys hoot at each other, with their eyes burrowing into the back of his neck. Their greasy fingers fiddling with his uniform, breathes hot and sticky.

As the bus pushes through the low-hanging trees that screech against the glass, the bus bounces along, causing his stomach to tighten over and over again.

Andrew closes his eyes tightly, silently begging, "Don't throw up! Don't throw up! Don't throw up!"

On each bounce, his fingers dig further into the armrest, which is worn bald and patchy by many others who played games along the way. In the air, the stench of gym socks and month-old sandwiches climb up his nose. Snuffling and trying to keep it away, he wraps his shirt tightly around his nose. Unexpectedly, there is another heart-jumping bump; he hurriedly picks up the bucket, gripping it tightly until his knuckles go white. As the road spreads outwards in a more even fashion, his uneasy stomach begins to settle. As he looks over his shoulder, the lads resume their singing, off-pitch with a fair amount of screeching, their faces red and strained from their joyous screams.

Straightening in his seat, he sets the bucket down at his feet, messaging his hands which are indented from his bucket-grabbing.

At his side is the teacher, Mr. Sampson smiles easily adjusting his glasses, "See ya later, mate, got a little something to take care of. Make sure you keep the bucket near ya?"

Andrew inhales sharply, and a slightly-panicked look appears in his eyes, "Yes...."

*Please don't go I need protection.....*

"Good, good," brushing off his legs, Andrew watches as he walks along to the back of the bus, "Alright, lads, what's the problem....?"

His voice fades among the rampant cheering, "The wheels on the bus go round...!"

Sighing heavily, Andrew kicks at the bucket, "How are you doing, Andrew?"

His eyes widen, and his stomach tightens as he hears the sudden thud of someone settling down next to him, "You going to up-chuck over us, Andrew?"

He puts himself as close to the window as possible, "Please leave me alone."

A second later, Andrew can feel the knuckle of the larger boy digging into his head, "Ahhhh, you're not so bad are you?"

Trying to break free, he glances around desperately.

His eyes land on a bony, snot-nosed kid with lanky, shoulder length hair.

Looking down his nose at them, Mark flicks a rubber-band over to the front, clipping the ear of the larger boy. He immediately rises from his seat, glaring at him, "Do you have a problem....?"

Andrew shakes his head in disbelief, *that's kind of surprising...*

Mark mumbles into his sleeve, turning away as he draws closer, "Ahhhh....."

A second later, a stream of liquid erupts over his shoes, "Arrghh, what the hell?"

Sitting down on the higher platform, one lad with chocolate-brown hair is hanging over the railing, coughing heartily into his hand. Everyone looked on in shock, as the remains of chicken and avocado wafted through the air. His eyes flickered upwards, constantly moving from one thing to another. The boy stumbled up to where he was sitting, his legs covered in a sickly rash.

With his hand shaking and his teeth grinding together, he walked over to Thomas, "What are you...."

There is silence as the musical screeching filters out; every pair of eyes looks over at Thomas, whispering in a mixture of excitement and fear.

Thomas holds up his hands innocently, apologising profusely as Mr. Sampson stumbles over bags, water bottles and bucket hats as he drops on down, his brow dripping with sweat, his ivory-white hair glossy in the sunlight. His eyes gleam with shock, as he looks Noah up and down, "Ohhhhh, what happened?"

Andrew draws away, looking down into his empty-bucket, "Well....."

Mark is nervously pulling at his hair, "Ahhhh....."

With his hands on his hips, his foot taps restlessly, "Can't wait all day, guys."

Thomas puts up his hand, "I am so sorry, sir, it was just that he came out here to help me, but then the bus went over a bump."

Mr. Sampson shrugs, "You should've asked for a bucket, mate."

Putting his hand onto his shoulder, he walks up to the driver, "Pull over, mate."

Spinning the wheel to the right, the morning is alive with jovial melodies, of magpies chiming and the wind whistling. Pausing for a brief second, Andrew breathes in deeply taking a sudden interest in his camping-bag, feeling the piercing gaze of the boy who is covered from knee to foot, with a sickly rash running down his calf, "Hold on."

The other lads do the same, turning away and looking anywhere else.

Putting a hand to his ear the driver looks over, "Is there a problem?"

Mr. Sampson waved his concerns aside, "One of the lads felt a little dizzy, and just need to wash this one off."

He points to a shady spot by low-lying trees, "Could you go down there?"

Nodding at these words, the driver spins the wheel, "No worries, do you want the rest to join in?"

Mr. Sampson waves it off, "Nahh, quicker we get there the better."

Turning back, he takes the boy by the shoulder, "Come on, Noah, we'll get you right and proper in a second, mate."

Once they're outside, the hose is stirring like a brown-bellied snake, whipping around crazily. Watching on, the hazel-brown trees list peacefully in the breeze, and the hordes of rainbow lorikeets seem to jeer at his misfortune. All around, there are grassy lawns overladen with clovers, a pitter-patter of white dots buzzing with bees and brown-muddy leaves.

Andrew looks on, as Noah begins to play up to the crowd.

With plenty of jeering, he begins making his way down the bus.

Spraying his window, Andrew ducks instinctively, holding his hands over his face.

Everyone is now cheering, wanting to join the water show.

Noah washes off his legs and salutes them, laughing to himself.

Looking on for a moment longer, Andrew turns to the other boy, "Thanks for helping me."

Mark folds his arms, "Please I didn't help you I don't like him."

Andrew fires back, his voice crackling with tension, "Right, well I didn't help you either, I don't like him."

Meeting his gaze with equal ire, he chuckles softly, "Yes, we are on a bus-full of boys we don't like."

Agreeing reluctantly with each other, they turned away, "Yes, this is true."

Crossing their arms and turning their heads away, "Hhhmmmmm...."

As Noah makes his way back onto the bus, he throws his hands into the air.

The scouts respond like musicians to a composer, "The wheels on the bus go round and round, all day long!"

Andrew presses his hands tightly over his ears, popping painfully as the bus tore down the road.

"Why do they have to do that?"

Mark snorts sarcastically, "Because they're talented people."

Mr. Sampson laughs, "Don't miss a beat do ya? Anyway guys, we're nearly there."

The bus hisses, taking off into the low-hanging branches, stuttering over the gravelly-road.

Moments later, Andrew can hear the crackle of gravel and the faint rustling of the dancing trees.

A loud booming voice made its way down the walkway, "All right everyone and we're here!"

Mr. Sampson was alive, his eyes bright with humour as he marched down the walkway, "Come on, you lot! Go, and go, go! It's time, lads!"

Andrew mutters drily, "I wish it wasn't."

One after another the bus emptied out, until only Andrew, Mark and Thomas remained.

He stood by the door, his motions restless, "Come on, you can't stay on the bus forever."

Exchanging a glance, they groan swinging their bags onto their shoulders.

Andrew jumps off, feeling a wave of heat stinging his eyes, he rubs at them furiously. His lip curling as he glances around the clearing, seeing the flowering trees and their rich canvas of flowers releasing irritable pollens into the heat-searing wind. As he kicks away at the ground, he can feel sweat trickling over his brow, and soon he begins sneezing.

With each rush of wind, he once more has a deep feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Andrew walks alongside him, "Look mate, can we form an alliance?"

Mark raises an eyebrow, "Okay...."

He adds, "A temporary thing until we can get out of here."

They shake hands, sealing the deal, "HmMMM, I suppose that is a fair decision."

Moments later, Thomas walks up to them, swatting away irritably at the butterflies and bees darting around his head, "Hey, guys. You're the only other geeks here, and I don't want to get killed. I guess we're a team now."

He takes a long drawl from his water bottle, spitting onto one of the papery-bark trees.

Mark gives in, blowing a strand of hair out from his eyes, "I guess."

Thomas chuckled dully, taking another long drink, before spitting into the grass.

As they drew nearer to the wooden cabins, the birds were singing joyfully, as they made their way through the rays of the afternoon sun. Each building bears the signs of a previous scout, their names etched upon the patchy, weary door. The paint breaks on the beams; Andrew shakes himself as colonies of ants navigate their way through the grass. A swarm of critters that begin to cross over his foot, kicking and jumping around wildly, a few that pass by laugh at this display, "Damn...."

Noah looks back, his mane of dirty-blond hair falling around his shoulders, "Come on, Andrew, they aren't going to hurt you."

Mr. Sampson beams at the group, "Come on, lads, the day is ours."

Thomas took one last drink, holding his hand up to block out the rays.

Every now and then, they spy animals casually making their around the camp.

Still feeling unsettled from the bus ride, Andrew lags behind feeling the boys drawing closer.

Their sweaty faces and greasy hands, he shudders to himself.

Mr. Sampson laughs, "I wonder where he...."

As they draw closer to the centre, a colony of rainbow lorikeets soars through the gold-tinted clouds.

Andrew jumped back as a tall man appears out of the woodwork, tanned and wiry with an almost childlike energy, "Welcome one; welcome all, to Mount Tamborine!"

Everyone turns to attention forgetting their earlier antics, "Look at you, we're gonna have a good time, I can taste it."

Andrew looks closely into his eyes, *he's so excited...*

The tall man began rubbing his hands together, doing a dance, "My name is *Kagohn*."

He took off his weathered hat, tipping it to each of them in turn, revealing a crop of wild, rapturous hair, his face awash with green, brown and a hint of gold, "How are you doing?"

Thomas shook his head, "I don't know what to say..."

Mark watched as the man flicked through his strands of hair, revealing a faint scar residing near his temple. A few of the scouts were muttering amongst each other, Andrew, Mark and Thomas continued to bat away at the buzzing bees, daredevil butterflies and the branches that flick out occasionally. The cabins are tall, reaching into the sky, their tin-plate rooves glimmering like silver in the late afternoon-sun.

Mr. Sampson responded in kind, "Pretty well, I'd say, mate. The lads are rearing to go."

Kagohn now has a beaming smile, Andrew rubs the back of his neck, "Good, good, well you lot, follow me!"

Jumping down to join them, a few immediately ask, "How did you get that scar?"

"I was a little-old baby, wet behind the ears. Decided to go into the wild, was always a little too adventurous for my old ma's sake, and a red-fur kangaroo hooped on by."

Noah was open-mouthed, "Did you get him back?"

"Nah, mate, kangaroo was a she, a real looker too," with a cheeky-grin, he took down a natural path continuing his story, ", couldn't bring myself to do it, and from that day forward, I always take care of their runts, got a few scattered around camp, I'll show ya where they drink."

*An interesting fellow*, Andrew thought, *maybe he'll keep Noah off my back....*

As the others follow close behind, a few clods of dirt lift into their eyes, Mark stumbled and tripped over a tree root that was growing out of the ground, "Don't worry, lads, the dirt ain't something to worry about, besides if I ever get too much on me, we have our own personal spa."

Mark spluttered, "He's....he's being serious?"

As they continued along the trail, a few roos appeared from behind the trees, sniffing the air as they made their way around the camp. Andrew followed the direction of his hand, catching sight of a rocky-pool at the base of a towering basalt wall.

Kagohn leans down, sighing at its coolness, "If it gets hot, throw yourselves in."

Enjoying their adoration, and seeing the shock on their faces, he laughs heartily, "Don't worry I'm only pulling ya leg. If you want traditional, we have showers done there."

The lads seemed excited at the prospect of jumping into the water, "Perhaps we'll be taking a dive before long; in any case I have one last thing to show you."

A series of metal stalls gleamed in the sun, gesturing hurriedly to his left, "Along yonder, we have your cabins, you have...."

He begins counting aloud, tapping his fingers to calculate, "Five minutes, get your stuff in there, then return to the big house."

With that command, the scouts ran off quickly, crashing into the doors in their eagerness to get inside. The rooms were tight and musty, with a faint simmering of dust gathering on the windowsill, and the bedframes creaked beneath their sudden weight. A set of cabinets were set against the wall, uneven and tilting away from the oaken beams, their tables were arranged and a few bottles of water were spread around.

Thomas sighed, "I suppose it's been decided then."

Mark tossed his bag away, his eyes narrow and nose wrinkled, "Aren't you going to unpack?"

He pointed a quivering finger at the cabinet, "If you think I'm putting my stuff in there, you're mad."

A second later, a spider makes its way down a slender, web.

Mark swallows loudly, "Did you see that bugger, there's something in there."

Looking for a moment, their eyebrows are disappearing into their hairline as they look for the spider.

After a long while of searching for it, they settle back down, "It must have run off."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"You don't see it swinging around, besides it that thing wants flies it'd be better off doing that outside."

Mark crosses his arms, "Or maybe it wants to eat us."

Thomas kicks back, "That would take a very long time."

Not bothering to answer, they settle back into their gear, "Look, if you don't want it crawling over your stuff just leave it in your bag."

"There's also the chance that it could get into your bag."

With a huff, Mark tosses his stuff away, "Fine, but if there's webs all over it...."

"Then the spider probably will get to our stuff as well. We're in this together, mate."

Muttering darkly under his breath, Mark bangs the door shut.

Giving in, the three of them went to work, before stowing away their toiletries, "At least we don't have to use those things."

Placed on the sink were a set of toothbrushes, chewed and worn thin.

Thomas chuckled, "I'm sure you'd feel under the weather if you had to."

Mark kicked his legs out as he settled onto the mattress, "Look, I know my limits, and this is definitely something I didn't want to be a part of."

A sharp knock on the door startled them, "Come on, lads."

After they were done dumping their bags inside, they returned to the scouts who jumping crazily into the air to hear more of Kagohn stories, "Then that furry brickhouse took me foot."

Noah asked, "Where did the wombat go next?"

"He went scampering back home," he relaxed on the patio, "the fella wanted my sandwich, so I gave it to him, never was a fan of ham and cheese."

"He pops by every now and then, Bricks; he's getting a bit older now...."

His voice trails off as the others fall in; Noah looks over his shoulder, glaring at them.

He clapped his hands together, "I'll tell ya more lately, now that everyone is here, we move onto the good stuff."

Taking off immediately, he vanished into the treeline, with the last embers of the dying sun settling upon the shifting leaves.

The leaves crackled and the grass rustled as they delved deeper and deeper into the undergrowth, with the sound of water rushing onto mossy stones.

Noticeably panicking, Thomas looks over the trees, "What if we get lost out here?"

Kagohn shakes his head, "Ohhh, you don't have to worry about that. If you get lost, there is only one thing you need to do, follow the river."

Thomas shrugged his shoulders, looking down at his shoes, "Sounds simple enough."

They went along the shining waterway, with its reflective surface disappearing from view.

A gust of wind spilled over them, ruffling their hair, Andrew lost his footing and nearly fell into the water, "It's a lot better if you just step in the middle, mate makes it a lot easier."

His shoes were soaking wet, "Thanks...."

Mark held onto his hand a second longer, "Yeah, well, watch where you step."

Andrew takes more care, feeling a light shower of water landing on his skin, "Sure, sure, I will."

Kagohn started whistling a merry tune, "So, I'll finish off this journey, by taking you down this way."



The hustle and the bustle of the scouts resumed, as they ran through the forest, "So, Thomas, what do you think of our geography lesson?"

He responds, flipping his bottle end over end, "You call pointing to a river a lesson?"

Mark snorts drily, already doing battle with the hungry mosquitos, "It appears to be."

The grass rustles and the leaves hiss, and the jeering songs of the birds fade away.

In the distance, a sheer rock-wall cut through the treeline, "We pass Witch's fall, not a bad spot if you ask me."

Running up the fall, there were ferns and vines wrapped around the stone, "Up this way."

Kagohn runs across a log, jumping over the small, puffy weeds that rest on the bank. Andrew kept swatting away, kicking at their soft trunks as they ducked beneath branches.

Andrew looks around nervously, the only colour that remains is green, brown and a dark blue sky, "How does he not get lost in this....?"

Thomas responds, "It must be like home. How else could he run through it so quickly?"

After a hearty round of slaps, a few red patches appear on Mark's arms.

Andrew asks gently, "You okay, Mark?"

The mozzies were in great numbers swarming through the undergrowth to reach them.

Now, he could feel them landing on the back of his neck, "Does it look like I'm okay? These bloody bastards....!"

He reaches behind his back, trying to squash a fat mozzie flat.

Thomas looks over, seeing the bites running up and down his arms, "You're like a magnet?"

"Yeah," Mark continues swatting at the hungry-critters.

Kagohn took note, his bright teeth appearing ghost-like in the gloom, "Don't worry, mate, I've got just the place."

As they move through the grass, the hills steepen.

Andrew yelps, getting a chuckle out of everyone.

As they walk over the rocky-hill, it is pitted with groves of ferns with seeds glowing faintly in the light of the moon.

Mark hears a sudden flutter, "Something just flew by...."

His eyes widening as he discerns a feathered bird, with a small, furry creature in its claw.

Kagohn appears, cooing softly to it, "Ahhhh, a frogmouth...."

It responds, bowing its head to reveal oval eyes, "Been a while hasn't it, Froggy, I'll see ya later."

Noah watches him with awe, completely taken in by his owl that screeches overhead.

"How many friends dose these men have?"

Thomas mutters, "Wouldn't be surprised if it was the whole forest."

Mark adds, "I'd bet on that, the mossies' love us."

Thomas put emphasis on his words, "They seem just to like you, mate, come on."

Mark glares back at him, "I'll get going in a second."

Andrew stumbles ahead of them, "It looks like we're nearly there."

Passing through the undergrowth, the grass clings to their calves and the leaves crackle softly beneath their shoes. A series of web-like vines were reaching out for the light, wrapping around the trees like snakes. Their roots disappearing into the ground, Andrew hold onto them for stability as he makes his way through the haze, barely able to discern what lay ahead of him.

Andrew turns around slightly, his face barely lit, "Can you see anything?"

The others are kicking through the rippling, ankle-high grass and the low-hanging ferns.

Mark crashes into his back, "Nah, can you?"

Andrew trips over, his knees turning green as he slides over the grass, "Arrghh...."

Mark raises his hands in front of him, pacifying him quickly, "Sorry...."

He blusters back, "Why did you do that?"

Mark points ahead of him into the gloom, "Look, I can't see anything; I'm following your footsteps."

With general chatter, they continue until finally a clearing appears, "Guys, here we are."

In front of them, lay a dark tunnel of rock, with not a flicker of light inside.

Kagohn beckons for them to follow; on either side it is rough and uneven, the floor digging into their shoes as they duck beneath the low-hanging ceiling.

Slipping on a patch of wet rock, Thomas trips into the wall, "Arrghh...."

"Mind your step, guys."

It is grey, pitted and lined with cracks, a furry thing leaves the cave swiftly and Andrew ducks instinctively, tripping and falling nosily onto the ground, feeling it dig into his palms. He feels a cold hand on his shoulder, "Don't worry, it seems they're not interested in eating us."

Rising back to his feet, Andrew continues to wander through the cave.

Mark hovers close for a second longer, "You good?"

Andrew scratches the back of his head, "Yeah, I'm good; just felt something fly past my ear is all."

Lying low to the ground, he continues casting his eyes warily to the ceiling, "Don't worry, they ain't gonna disturb us."

"And here we go...."

The air in the cave is musky, and the scouts funnel out.

Kagohn spreads his arms wide, "This is one of the many wonders in Mount Tamborine."

Mark shakes his head in disbelief, "A cave....?"

"Yes, but not just any cave, one filled with wonder. Come on in."

Suddenly, the tunnel widens and the entire cave is lit up with thousands of glow worms.

"Wow, how many are in here?"

"Who knows, this is mating season, the girls are shinning. Look at em close, the boys will be dropping on by."

A few narrow beetles climb up the wall, "They're gonna be busy."

In every possible direction, it was like a galaxy of stars, contained within this cave.

Sweeping over the natural lights, Kagohn takes one gently from the wall, holding it out for everyone to see, "If you ever need a flashlight, these little guys are quite helpful."

Andrew drew away, seeing the insect squirming away in his hand, its legs kicking wildly.

Letting a handful crawl over his arm, "They're quite friendly."

Mark squirms, holding his hand tightly over his mouth.

Thomas who is standing next to him mutters, "If you're gonna be sick, mate, please don't do it over me."

Laughing wistfully, the man placed it on Andrew's shoulder, who yelps, "No need to worry, mate, they don't bite."

Andrew eyes the worms, watching the disgusting glow sticks with their spindly, fork-like legs and their brown, dirt-coloured exoskeletons moving around on the wall. Their mandibles moving and clicking together, "These things are disgusting."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

Andrew reaches around to take it off his shoulder; it begins crawling through his hair, trying to find a roost for a mate in his hair. Feeling his stomach drop, he fishes it out like a monkey pruning its hair, before flicking it away.

He takes a deep sigh of relief, feeling the rocky-floor digging through his shoes.

Andrew looks over at Mark who now has had enough of the cave, closing his eyes, "Why are you looking so sick?"

"It's not like he put one of those things on you."

Perhaps hearing their conversations, the other scouts start slamming their shoes on the ground.

Within moments, they begin singing beneath the mantle of the stars, "There ain't no worms on us!"

Kagohn bellowing out, "I love this song. There may be worms on some of you guys. But there ain't no worms on us!"

Soon, everyone is screaming as loud as they can, "There ain't no worms on us!"

Mark is still rubbing at his arm, "I wish that was the same for the mozzies. I've had enough of those for a lifetime."

The song continues as they cross back into the chaotic mass of trees, ferns and animals.

"There may be worms on some of you guys!"

After screaming their hearts out, they resume their trek through the wilderness.

With an ease to his steps, Kagohn leads them back to their cabins, "Lads, I can tell you'll be a lot of fun, a hell of a lot of fun! Night all, tomorrow, the real adventures begin."

"Great," Andrew muttered, ", just great."

Walking back to their cabin, Andrew jumped onto his bed, "Real adventures begin? I wonder what that means."

Mark responded, rubbing irritably at his eyes, "Nothing good, maybe we'll be eating those worms."

It earned a bitter laugh, "Great, they count as light and food."

Andrew smiled at their pessimism, "We'll have to wait and see."

Stumbling past the window, the wind whistles gently, with the blinds tapping softly on the glass.

A heavy yawn forcing its way through, Andrew, Thomas and Mark as they settle onto their bunks.

"Yeah," Thomas looks over at his cabin mates, doing a salute, "well, goodnight."

Sinking into the mattresses, they look out into the wilderness, a long-silver abode. Outside, the window, the milky-way aligns with the forest, stars that glimmer brightly through a mass of eucalyptus trees, their trunks inseparable from the last. At this late hour, the fluttering of wings can be heard, as a thorny-frogmouth takes off in search of its prey. It disappears into the gloom of the forest, shifting restlessly into the ethereal valley of withered trunks, wildflowers and litter.

Within moments, Andrew, Thomas and Mark settle beneath the covers, sinking deeper and deeper, "Night..."

Drifting soundlessly into a deep sleep, the sounds of the nightlife take over Mt Tamborine.

A moment later, the sun returns, causing the three boys to groan as they turn over. Within moments, the door is flung open, by a smiling Kagohn, who roars at them, "Up, you get! Up, up!"

Mark turned off, pressing his pillow around his head, "Why, it's like five in the morning."

"Exactly," Kagohn was framed in the doorway, his smile a second sun, ", nice and early. You have two minutes."

Turning over, Andrew buries his head into his pillow, "Why...?"

"You're not the only one," Mark sat up, yawning heavily, ", why does he have to do all that?"

"Do you want him to come back?" Thomas asked, as he stumbles onto his feet, hurriedly putting on his pants.

A second later, they all rub the sleep from their eyes.

After a round of putting on their uniforms, the kookaburras cackle at their stuttering walk.

"Good, everyone is here," Kagohn beamed at everyone, "Now, lads, follow me."

With the breath of the wilderness in their hair, they press into the cascading forest, alive with the sounds of sharp, piercing screeches of the rainbow lorikeets. The haze is green, brown and gold, and the richness of the eucalypts trees hang heavily on the air. With their fingers blocking out the smell, they draw as far away from the trees as they can, "Man, that's strong."

"Tell me about it," Mark sweeps his hands through his rich coating of blond hair, which was tied back in a pony-tail, muttering with his nose pressing against his sleeve, ", they're everywhere."

Thomas takes his hand away, eyeing the multi-coloured bark.

He drew away, seeing the ants making their way to the green sap, "Look at those buggers climbing all over it."

Andrew recoils, "Yeah..."

Kagohn pointed up into the shifting branches, "Look up, guys, we have our dropbears watching us."

A few sleepy, eyed Kolas were picking at the glossy, green leaves.

"Be careful, they look calm, but go up there tree and they'll let you know about it."

Thomas nervously stepped away, "They don't do that, do they?"

Andrew shrugging his bony-hooked shoulders, "Come on, it's not like we'll be climbing up a tree."

"Actually," Kagohn said, with a brilliant, gleaming smile, ", that's what you'll be doing right now."

Mark crossed his arms stubbornly, his eyes wide with shock, his jaw hanging loosely as he splutters, "You had to open your mouth, didn't you?"

Andrew didn't waste a second before blustering back, "How was I supposed to know?"

Thomas draws a deep breath, closing his eyes, "Come on, guys, let's see what's happening."

Kagohn continued his sprint through the undergrowth, with the scouts following close behind. The trees spread outwardly in all directions, transitioning from dirty-grey, to chocolate brown with hints of red shifting through the papery bark, to black marks running up to the flourishing flowers.

Andrew can feel the wind brushing through his hair; can see the pollen of these flowers, white, yellow, red and pink. He repeatedly sneezes as they land on his nose.

Scratching irritably at his nose, he continues to run over the trackless hills, hearing the sound of the natural wildlife moving through the undergrowth. Kicking away at the leaves and sunning themselves over the rocks and branches. Following closely behind, Andrew ducks beneath the limbs trees, hearing the sounds of furry, possum-looking things take flight.

A familiar laugh can be heard, "Nice of you to drop on by, my friends."

Startled by these furry things, "What are these things?"

"We call em the great gliders, this one over there. Handsome fella, isn't he?"

Andrew looks at it, with its large, round ears and gleaming eyes, "Yeah, I guess he is."

A few remain where they are, picking away at the eucalypts leaves, burying it into their mouths.

"They are, when they're young, we keep an eye over em. Make sure they're not crashing through the window."

Andrew winced as it leaped from its perch, "Has that happened before?"

"Yeah, I remember one night the lads were having a ball, then boom, it was a like a bomb going off. The red-brown one, you see him? He wanted something different, didn't you?"

Waiting for him to jump into another story, the other scouts pick up a chant, "Tell us!"

"Tell us!"

Kagohn smiles eagerly, "Don't worry, the red fella ran off with a stick of deodorant."

They cheer, satisfied with the ending, he bows taking in their applause.

He seems distracted for a moment, "Now, where was I? Ohhh, yes...."

Kagohn places his hand, on one of the tallest trees in the forest, he turns back to the group, "Now, guys, its show time."

Andrew stutters, "Show time....?"

Shooting at him with finger-guns, Kagohn cracks on with a smile, "That's right, mate, and time for you all to have some fun."

Mark whispers too softly for him to hear, "Why can't we just study it? Why do we have to climb it?"

Andrew puts his nose in the air, "Don't look at me."

Mark looks at his chin, "Who else would I look at; you're the one that mentioned it."

Andrew raises his hand towards the tree, "He probably would have done it anyway."

"Guys," Thomas barks, ", guys....!"

Both look back to the front, as Kagohn points up, "Your task is to say hello to our friendly neighbours."

Looking up through the branches, a group of lazy, grey-fur kolas were kicking back.

Relaxing comfortably into the tree forks, they were busy munching on leaves, their round, fluffy ears like radars, taking note of the crackling footsteps of the scouts. Andrew remains far away from the drop-zone, straining his eyes to see them, nestled into wooden forks with their long, claws digging into the bark. Andrew looks over his shoulder at the others, a bunch of sweaty-faced boys were running around the base of the tree, hooting and dancing monkeys that would soon climb to join the more dignified neighbours.

They look down from their perch, their black, round eyes gleaming with curiosity.

Andrew mutters, "Even they don't know what to make of them."

Thomas shrugs, "That's hardly surprising, I mean look at them."

They continued around the trees, and Kagohn was dancing among it all, "Are you all ready?"

Roaring in excitement, the scouts look like they're in a rock concert, "Yes! Yes!"

Flashing a thumbs up, he roared to them, "Everyone, line up."

Mark takes in a deep breath, "I wish I was them."

Thomas yawns, his eyes becoming lost among the kolas, "You're not the only one."

A few of the young ones clung to their mothers, "Why are we doing this?"

Mark looks back at Andrew, "Because somebody...."

"Look, are you still going on about that?"

"What, it was your idea."

"You really think I wanted this?"

"Right now, we're in a mess."

"Well, maybe we should figure a way out of this mess."

"Okay, so have you got some crazy idea or maths theory that you can apply?"

Continuing to argue amongst themselves, Kagohn was explaining the equipment, "Now, guys, make sure the harness is secure, otherwise you'll be taking a one-way trip into an ant-hill."

Despite the joking nature of his words, his eyes were narrowing, "Safety first, boys."

"Now, I'll demonstrate how this thing works, so make sure you pay attention."

Mr. Sampson had his way up and down the line, "Everyone, listen up!"

"Now, watch closely," he begins fastening the sides and clipping the front down, "Nice and tight, like a Joey in a pouch. Once you got this bad-boy on, it's time to climb. Your teammates are there for you, they've got your back."

Springing onto the tree, the cable tightens as they begin to pull back on it, "If you don't like the view, call out. Though I don't think I'll have to worry about that."

The boys respond with enthusiasm, "In any case, on the way up and down, this thing can really give you a killing in the ribs."

He drops down suddenly, the tension causing a few leaves to fall away, "Now, rules are done. You lot got any questions?"

As he lowered himself to the ground, he brushed himself down, "No, alright bloody good, time for ya all to get ready."

Andrew looks up, and feels his heart begin to race, "So, plan, guys, what have we got?"

Mark sighs, "I've got something."

He points to the structure of the tree; a rotting log is leaning against it.

Thomas follow his gaze, "Ahhh, I see, well I haven't got anything better."

Andrew acknowledges the point reluctantly, "You reckon we should go for it?"

A few were beginning to claw at the tree, "Not like we have much of a choice."

Thomas adds his piece, "Your right about that, so after the boost, what are you gonna do?"

Mark goes over to one of the younger trees, "That depends on the bark; it seems that you can tear into it."

Looking over their shoulders, a couple of bush turkeys pick their way through the leaves, looking for insects and scraps of food.

Kagohn beckons them forwards, "Now, it seems we already have two groups that are rearing to go!"

Andrew, Mark and Thomas turn around, a fluttery and light-hearted feeling pulsating from their hearts. After a brief second, Kagohn points directly at them, "Yes, you guys. Come on."

They point to their own chests, "Us, sir....?"



Kagohn finger-guns them, "I'm looking at you lot, come on."

A few jeering cries respond to their reluctance, "You got it."

Another group is already standing alongside.

Great, it's Noah, just perfect. Of course he's on the other team. Well, it looks like he'll be getting his revenge. It was fun while it lasted.

Mr. Sampson raises his hand, "How about we make this interesting?"

"Could we not?" Thomas groans, "I mean this is a climb, right?"

Kagohn laughs, locking eyes with their teacher, "Right you are, mate, so why not add a little something to the mix. Whoever gets up and back first, you're gonna get nice, warm showers."

Everyone is now cheering; Thomas mutters drily, "How did we get caught in this?"

With a bitter laugh, Mark responds, "It must've been obvious we were planning something."

Andrew does a placating gesture, "Great, I suppose in future we won't be standing out in the open."

Kagohn raised his arms into the air, encouraging the lads to scream louder, "On our right we have, Andrew, Thomas and Mark!"

Dancing over to the other team, he bellows, "And on our left, we have Alex, Liam and Noah!"

After a round of cheering, Kagohn beckons them, "Alright, lads, this will be a three-on-three race, once one of ya is finished, clip off and pass on."

Checking them carefully, Kagohn give them the nod to get into position, "Good, good, it's time!"

Returning his gaze to the crowd, Kagohn continues to hype up the scouts, "He's having way too much fun."

"Tell me about it," Mark snorts sarcastically, "; now, I think I'm the lightest out of us. Make sure to hurl on that rope as hard as you can."

Turning around to face it, he puts his hands out in front of him, gauging the distance that is required to land on the papery-surface of the tree. Andrew put his arm to a forty-five degree angle, using his right hand to make a stick-figure that runs up it.

"It's less than ideal, but if you time it right..."

Mark looks over his shoulder, a thin sheen of sweat covering his forehead, nervously flexing his fingers and pulling on his hair, easing out the kinks, "Look, I know how this works; get on the end then leap."

He brushes it off, before wiping it off on his pants, "Yep, just makes sure you put your back into it."

Mark steps around nervously, "I'm planning to. Who am I going up against?"

“Noah....”

“So I’m going against the one that you vomited over, why does it feel like I’m the one getting the short end of the stick?”

“Look, that wasn’t intentional, now be prepared, these things have plenty of kick.”

Andrew and Thomas exchange glances, “When you get up there, claw on as much as you can.”

Mark shook his head, “Well, I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t have brekkie then, just don’t leave me hanging.”

Checking the equipment over, they sign is resignation, “Ready?”

Mark responds, “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Kagohn roars to the scouts, “Alright, we are going in three....!”

Beginning the count down, “THREE....!”

“TWO....!”

“ONE...!”

Kagohn screams at them, “GO....!”

Mark immediately takes off to the bent-over trunk, jumping onto it hesitantly.

With his shoes digging into the wood and his arms flailing in the air for balance, he sticks the landing; he uses it as a runway, ripping through the papery bark in his urgency to climb higher and higher, in seconds he nears the top of the rotting, ant-ridden log, a thick trail of ants and other critters spill onto the ground. He begins shaking his head, falling back down from his perch until he lands on the grass, “Come on, Mark, come on, you can do this.”

Thomas screams as he the flecks of bark fall away, “Don’t you dare quit.”

Taking in a deep breath, readying himself to take off, “You’ve got this.”

Kagohn nods to them, clapping his hands together, “It looks like Mark is being urged on by his teammates. You got this, mate!”

Andrew points up, “If you have to close your eyes, do it.”

Mr. Sampson pats him on the shoulder, “I’m scared of heights too, mate, you’ll regret not doing it, I guarantee you that.”

With his face growing paler with each step, he takes off once more.

His shoes clicking as they glide over the log, at the base a few spikey echidnas begin to feast, “I guess that problem is taken care of....”

This time he lands with plenty of zeal, his eyes fixed firmly on the natural runway.

Thomas and Andrew scream together, "Go for it, Mark!"

As he begins his journey up the log, his hands are already coloured white as the papery-dust falls around him, "Got to time it right....."

His words drift off as the end draws nearer, "Got to....."

Time seems to slow down as he nears it, Kagohn is cheering for him, "Wow, it looks like Mark is really going for it!"

He begins a chant, "Go for it, Mark! Go for it!"

Andrew screams in desperation, "Now, Mark!"

With a freakish energy, he plants his shoe on the rounded peel of the decaying trunk, he hurls himself skywards, "Damn, Team MAT, he's flying."

As he sails through the air, the leaves and the branches hiss.

Andrew continues to scream, "Go.....Go....Go!"

Flailing through the air, he is a bird too young to fly.

His arms held out like wings, flapping wildly as gravity pulls him back down.

Andrew looks at him, "No....no.....no.....now!"

Thomas manages to bluster, "Okay...."

With this signal, their muscles begin to ach and convulse as they pull back on the rope, their chests heaving and their breaths short. With a short, but powerful run, Thomas and Andrew throw themselves backwards in one calculated movement, "Gotta rein him in!"

Playing tug-of-war, they continue pulling on it as much as they can, "Keep going....!"

Thomas screams back, "I'm doing as much as I can."

The ground breaks beneath their shoes, "Can't keep it going...."

With this game of active mathematics, they watch as Mark soars through the air.

His fingers curling and his legs set in motion, "Now hold, hold....!"

As the rope rapidly straightens, Mark is starting to open his eyes, as it the tree draws nearer, he is cursing under his breath.

A whisper that goes unheard, "This is going to hurt."

He takes a moment to blink, then the multi-coloured bark appears before his eyes, and he lets out a scream, "Arrggghhhhhh....!"

With it barely a breath away, his fear turns silent.

As he crashes noisily, he grips onto the tree like a koala, "Damn that hurt."

A raging furry overtakes him, as he tears into the papery-bark.

As he tears through the bark, it floats down onto Mark, causing him to cough.

He begins kicking away at it, trying to climb, as if he were a dog digging a hole.

"You're on it, Mark, get going!"

He takes in a breath as the richness of the leathery-leaves pound through his nose.

Andrew adds hurriedly, stealing the chance for Mark to contemplate his fear, "Don't look down; focus on what's in front of you!"

He reaches up, tearing away to find a handhold, pulling fragments free.

Boosting himself upwards, he appears as a ghost, his skin unnaturally white.

Kagohn cracks a grin, "Well, I'll be. A ghost climbing a tree! What a sight to see!"

Thomas pulls back on the rope, "Mark, get going!"

Feeling his stomach drop from the sudden pull, he hugs the tree tightly, "Get going!"

Mark shakes his head, grinding it on the bark, "Have they gone mad?"

As he jumps up again, the words of his allies reach him, "Just climb!"

"Great advice," his voice reaching a higher more squeaky tone, "I didn't think of that."

Mark digs his fingers into the bark, "That's it, Mark, use your body, the branches as well."

His voice retains its tremor, "I'm doing my best."

Kagohn is clearly enjoying the show, rubbing his hands, "Well, it seems Mark is off to a flying start, but Noah is determined to catch him!"

A heart shout from the opposing team follows, "You can get him, Noah!"

With his fingers pressing into the bark, he continues to boost himself up the tree.

Each movement causes his heart to beat louder, "Come on, Noah!"

Kagohn laughs, "I didn't figure you for a drop-bear mate. Mark is getting towards the branches."

Thomas yells up the tree, "Keep pushing man, you've got this!"

Kagohn continues his live commentary, circling around the tree to keep them in sight, "It seems that Noah is on Mark's tail!"

Andrew and Thomas are feeling the tension running through their bodies, their muscles screaming out in pain. Their fingers are growing whiter as the rope pulls on their hands, "You reckon Mark can do it?"

The ground beneath them, has been stripped clear of grass, and the leaves have become a powder.

Thomas pulls his hand away briefly, shaking out the stiffness, "He's doing well so far, he's lighter."

Shaking his head, he readjusts his grip, "Yeah, but what about after....? Will he be able to...?"

Thomas slips onto the ground, kicking free a clod of dirt, "I don't know."

Kagohn points up to the two boys, "Mark is slightly ahead of Noah, is he doing a repeat...?"

Mark reaches the branches, looping his arms around it, trying to hug it closely to his chest.

Each breath runs down his body, from his head, right down to his feet.

Reaching out with his legs, he swings himself from side to side, "He's mad!"

Andrew nods, "He is, making sure you steady yourself, he'll be doing it again."

Kicking his leg over, he pulls himself up, trying to catch his breath.

"That's it, Mark, get your energy back. Don't rush it!"

The other team is pacing around like untamed bears, "He's on the ropes, Noah!"

Looking back down, Mark catches sight of Noah, his teeth grinding together and his arms working like a well-oiled machine. His arms moving in rapidly, left then right, tearing away the bark with each movement. His shoes like a mountain-goat, kicking and jumping with a sure-footed grace.

Shaking his head, Mark looks up, "Still got so much to go."

As rises onto his knees, he measures the way ahead.

Kagohn claps his hands together, "Damn right he is, man, it seems we'll be calling you the koala after this."

*Great, I've got a nickname now...*

Reaching the base of the branches, Mark mutters to himself, "Okay, now use momentum."

With a jumping-sprint, he begins springing from branch to branch, his hands dust-ridden and stained with bark, and his long-blond hair catching bark that falls from the tree, "Climb, climb....climb."

"It seems Mark has really found his calling, he'll be meeting our friendly neighbours very shortly."

Mark looks up, catching sight of one resident, with fluffy, grey-brown ears and a quivering nose, its eyes alight with curiosity, "Please don't drop on my face."

It pulls away at the leaves, eating them while watching him continue to struggle.

Mark continues to awkwardly scurry up the trunk, "Please don't."

Andrew shakes his head in disappointment, "They're neck and neck now."

Tasting the bark and the sweat rolling down his brow, he springs onto a higher branch, sitting in a wooden fork to regain energy for the final push. High up in the clouds, he sways with his heart in his mouth, his voice hovers low, crackling on every word, "Can you drop on him?"

The koala shook his head sleepily, before drifting off.

Most of the tree-dwellers watch on with interest, munching on their snacks as these two scouts climb higher and higher.

Kagohn raises his arms into the air, "We really have a showdown on our hands, lads, and cheer for em."

A few rounds of cheers break out, "Go Noah, go!"

"Come on, Mark, get to the top!"

Mark looks over his shoulder to the yawning drop, he hugs the tree tighter.

He screams into the ant-infested bark, "I can't do this."

Thomas and Andrew scream, "You can, you know you can!"

Everyone is screaming loudly, shaking their fists.

Mark pulls himself free from the fork, now he pushes through the foliage, looking upon the golden sun resting upon the land.

Stunned into silence, he sees the shifting foliage, the glimmering rivers, and the forest floor with the tiny ants that were jumping up and down, "I've done it, and I can't believe it."

A scream pushes through the branches, "COME DOWN...!"

Calling out, Mark descends quickly, "I'm coming! I'm coming!"

Straining their eyes for their mate, his uniform blends into the leaves.

But his ghost-like skin sharply contrasts, and a cheer threatens to burst free.

Andrew and Thomas brace themselves, "We're here, Mark, come on, man!"

They scream, "Go for it!"

Dropping down suddenly, his shoes were tearing through the bark.

"It's like an escalator, just ride it all the way down."

Mark used the footholds he made earlier, "Good job, Mark!"

As he hits the ground, he leans against it. Utterly spent, he stumbles over to his group, "Hey, guys...."

Andrew clapped him on the shoulder, "You did it. Wow, you did it."

Mark sat down heavily, "Yeah, yeah, I did."

Thomas joins them, "Is it as bad as it looks?"

"If you follow your own advice, you'll be fine."

Unclipping himself and taking it off like a coat, he hands it off, glistening with sweat, papery-bark, mud and a few insects, "Okay, we'll be doing a repeat, just like last time."

Andrew does a run up, feeling immediately out of his element as he jumps into the air.

"Okay, now pull with everything you've got!"

Reaching out with hands, Andrew smiles with relief when he finds the scout-made foothold, he begins ascending, using his active mind to calculate the best possible route, "What is he doing?"

He strains against with each upward movement that he makes; finding the deep holes made into the papery bark, inside it is vibrant, ivy green and a trail of ants and other critters spill are falling onto his hair. He begins shaking his head, shutting his eyes, "You've got it, Andrew!"

Thomas points to them, "Use the footholds!"

Listening to their advice, he begins making progress towards the branches.

A second later, Liam passes him by, "Focus, if you start panicking, you'll lose everything!"

*Okay, okay, just one step at a time....*

Andrew mutters under his breath, "How did Mark do this?"

A taunting voice responds, "So, what are you going to do, Andrew?"

Not bothering to answer, Andrew continues to push himself up the tree, "You going to up....chuck..."

Made reckless by fear, he shouts back, "Why don't you shut up?"

"Come on, Andrew, you must be tired."

On their race to the top, Liam remains firmly ahead of him, "How is he so far ahead?"

Thomas and Mark roar, "You've got this!"

As they race down to the bottom, Thomas runs forward as soon as his feet touch the ground, "Quick, quick!"

"Here, have it!"

Mark looks over as Thomas makes his run up the log, "We're onto the last round, it all comes down to this..."

Kagohn begins his last commentary skit, "We're onto the battle of the browns. We've got Alex and Thomas, let them hear ya!"

The final battle is close and tense, with both sides struggling in their own ways.

On the last hurdle, Thomas kicks himself as far away as he can from the tree, going in leaping motions.

"Just hold onto the rope, Andrew, it seems he knows a thing or two about it."

Kagohn kneels low onto the ground, "And we have...."

"DRAW....!"

Noah is agape, the shock plainly written over his face, "What....?"

"It seems both teams touched down at the same time, what a bloody close finish."

The rest of the afternoon rushes on by, and eventually the reddish-golden peaks through the clouds.

Kagohn beckons them towards him, "Alright, lads, time to head home."

Walking through the undergrowth, Kagohn spreads his arms wide, as if to embrace the final offerings of the day. The scouts duck beneath low-hanging branches, their progression marked by the sound of rustling grass and crackling leaves, to the wind that gently whispers through the limb-like branches. Each tree overshadows the other, each folding over the other as the clearing falls back into a distant memory.

"We'll be taking a bit of a shortcut, at the end I've got a bit of a surprise for you."

The wind is cool and nice; and the baked on dirt and sweat feel less and less irritable.

"You have your chance, right here!"

The scouts look all around them; Andrew looks down and feels his stomach tighten.

A sheer drop of several feet ends in a pond, "Is that safe....?"

Kagohn gives them a rock-star gesture, "Of course it is."

Without warning, he leaps from the edge, spinning wildly in mid-air.

"He's crazy."

"Yeah, I'm not surprised. I guess that's the alternative."

"Alternative....?"

"If you lose, since we got a draw we don't have to worry about that."

"That's a relief."

A loud splash shakes them and Kagohn quickly emerges, "Alright, lads, time to wash down."



With that they ran back into the camp, a series of metal stalls gleamed in the afternoon sun, and the cabins arose from the haze, "A warm shower sounds nice...."

"Yeah, it does, can't wait for it."

Stepping into their cabin, the wind brushes the dirt from their hair, "We drew with them."

"Yeah, we did. I still can't believe we pulled through."

Thomas smiles tiredly, "I suppose having an alliance has its benefits. Come on, I want to wash this bark away."

Retrieving their toiletries, they run outside to hear the others dive-bombing into the pond.

Thomas looks on, slightly bewildered, "Well, it looks like it's just us that'll be having the showers then."

Hanging their additional uniforms over the stall, they adjust the showerheads.

A rush of hot, steaming water goes through their hair; a second later their heads are covered in soap buds, as their greasy, sweaty hair and the stink of their uniforms is washed away. Andrew stretches out his arms, rubbing vigorously at the dirt and bark that is stubbornly ingrained into the hairs on his forearms. A moment later it rolls over their shoulders, trickling down their skin, it felt comforting to be lost in the steam, allowing the stress, fear and worries to be cast away into the iron-grill on the floor.

At their feet, the tiles are moss-ridden and a thin trail of dirt lingers in the corners.

Andrew feels like he is in heaven, "Man...."

Mark strains the water from his hair, ringing it out and flinging it over his shoulder.

Thomas has his back to the showerhead, letting it wash over his back.

Putting their hands onto the walls of their stalls, they wander around, feeling the steam wash over them.

"This is the life."

The pitter-patter of water continues to echo, as they settle back under the warmth.

With the last of the suds crackle in his ears, Andrew smiles into his reflection.

A rush of water channels down his back, rinsing the shampoo from his hair.

Stepping out from the shower, Mark walks quickly into the changing stall, the towel wrapped around his waist and his long, blond hair now fuzzy from his round of drying, "It comes to an end."

Andrew seems saddened by this, "You want to go next?"

Thomas shakes his head, spitting out a mouthful of water, "Nahh, this is too nice."

"I don't disagree with you, but the mozzies will be out before you know it. And we don't have insect repellent."

He responded jokingly, "Talk about being a downer."

"Believe me; I'd love to stay in there."

As they step out, their hair is rife with disorder.

Turning the shower off, Andrew and Thomas go into the stall.

With their rolls of soap, shampoo and towels wrapped beneath their arms, their hair wild and unruly, they gazed into the sky, watching the stars align with the planets, "I guess this is another benefit."

"What for....?"

"You two understand the movements of the planets and the stars. I don't feel like I have to change what I'm saying."

Thomas laughs, "Ohhh, don't worry, you'll have to explain it to me eventually."

"How did you lock onto it so quickly?"

"I'd look through the telescope I had at home...."

"Find anything good....?"

Their stomachs grumble at the sound of a hissing fire, "Looks like meat is on the menu, boys!"

Thomas looks over his shoulder, his nose twitching to the meaty smell, "Well, better grab something before the others jump all over it."

Placed there dirty uniforms aside, they walk to the big house, seeing the others sitting lazily on the grass.

Kagohn welcomes them, "Now, guys, on my left we have some zingers, got some onions, tomato and mayo. Then we got the beef patties, the lettuce and a few bottles of juice and lemon-bitters."

Mr. Sampson calls out from the balcony, "First in, best dressed!"

Everyone takes off in a rush, eager to get there first, "Lads, this has been a great day. Tomorrow, we'll be putting your endurance to the test."

Noah raises his hand, talking through a mouthful of beef and lettuce, "What kind of challenge do we have?"

"The best kind, you'll be trekking through the outback."

A few exclaim, "Yes...!"

Kagohn basks in their enthusiasm, "Don't get too excited, it's not as easy as it sounds."

“Now that you lot have eaten, it’s time to head down to the campfire.”

With joyous shouts from the others, they follow Kagohn as he makes his rounds.

A raging fireplace, spewing a golden-red flame appears, “Here it is!”

Gathering around, he throws more logs and sticks onto it, “Now, I gotta a couple of songs.”

A melody of groggy-croaks filled the silence, “We know that the frogs go!”

The half to the left begin the chorus, “Hop, hop, hop....!”

Those on the right raise their voices higher, “We know that the frogs go!”

“Hop, hop, hop...!”

“Creak, creak, creak, all night long....!”

“That’s the stuff, now everyone make sure you grab some sticks, whoever gets here first will get a lot of marshmallows.”

Taking out a big, plastic bag of pink and white cushions, the others take off fearlessly into the forest.

Andrew sniggers, “You want to join em?”

Mark shakes his head, “Nah, I’m good, besides, I’ve already got these.”

Already with sticks in hand, they begin roasting them over the campfire, “Careful, might burn your tongue.”

Kagohn stands over the group, breathing in the ash of the fire, the wood falling apart and the late night breeze, “Now, lads, I have a good ghost story, wish I had a flashlight.”

Lowering himself over the fire, Kagohn appears with his eyes flickering with flame, “Long ago, back in the dreamtimes....”

He spread his arms around him, holding the wild in the palms of his hands, “Everyone in the settlement was happy, there was plenty to eat.”

“She ran through a forest, just like this one.”

A vision of a faraway place begins to form in their mind, the girls skipping through the grassy plains, ducking beneath the trees, their feet crackling over the tender leaves covering the ground.

He put another marshmallow on, measuredly turning it over on either side, “The women were preparing a meal.”

His smile is as warm as the fire, his eyes filling with a hint of nostalgia, “The men were teaching the boys to be good men.”

Putting the hot, steaming marshmallow into his mouth, he chews reflectively, “But there was one girl who wasn’t happy, Min – Na – Wee....”

Once more, they went into the past, seeing her jumping in on the games played by the girls, tearing away at their hair. The lads glaring at her face, which had a hard, scaly look and the elders shook their heads, something terrible was going to happen to Min – Na – Wee.

“She grew into a young woman, no one wanted to marry her, and trouble seemed to suit her still.”

The lads were enthralled, constantly asking questions, “Then one day, lads, the elders had enough, this was her punishment.....”

The young woman ran, but was eventually caught.

She rolled around and around in the dirt. It was a mist.

Her scaly face, hard and without softness, her eyes cold and devious.

There was no smile, but terror, as she rolled around and around in the dirt.

“She wanted revenge, so she asked the evil spirits to take her, scales covered her body, her eyes narrowed, becoming reptilian.”

His close his hands tightly into slits, mimicking the motions and the hissing sound of the predator, the way he circled around the fire, “Until, she became a large crocodile....”

Enthralled by this dance of hunger and revenge, Kagohn stops in place.

The others hang of his every move, Alex asked, “What happened next....?”

“Well, mate, whenever they get ya by the leg, that’s why they spin. Min – Na – Wee wants revenge.”

Clapping his hands together, he got to his feet, “Come on, and tell us another.”

“I will, but for now, let’s go to bed, we’ve got a very long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Heading back into their cabins, they settle down for a long rest from the chaotic climb.

As they settle down onto the mattresses, Mark yawns heavily, “Hopefully we won’t be stuck in the river then.”

Andrew pats down his bed, “You don’t think the story is actually true?”

“That a girl got turned into a crocodile, who knows? It’s just to warn you to stay away from the water’s edge; otherwise it can drag you under.”

Thomas continues, “The Croc takes you for a spin.”

Mark turns away, covering his mouth after a heavy yawn, “I’d prefer not to go on that ride.”

Andrew rubs away at the corners of his eyes, “That makes all of us, wonder what Kagohn has up his sleeve for tomorrow.”

Mark puts his elbow on his knees, “Who knows, maybe we’ll be doing something less stressful.”

Thomas pats him on the shoulder, “Don’t get your hopes up, anyway, I’m done. Night....”

A second later, Andrew and Mark respond, "Night...!"

Within moments, they pull the covers up to their chins.

The next morning, they remain under their blankets, hearing the faint laughter of kookaburras. Suddenly, a wave of heat pushes through the drawn blinds, Andrew groans and turns away from the rays. Picking up his pillow, he puts it over his head, sniffing as he readjusts to the flatness.

Mark has an even better idea, taking the covers and making a tent over himself, his snorty-drawl continues out of the bottom of this enclosure.

Thomas fed up with the rays of light, draws the blinds shut as quickly as he can.

Their peaceful morning is shattered by the cry of an excited animal, Mr. Sampson roars, "You lot, time to get up!"

Andrew groans, "Why now....?"

"It's the perfect time to get up!"

He walks over to the next cabin before they get a chance to reply.

"So, Mr. Sampson is crazy as well?"

"Hardly surprising, you'd have to be mad getting up this early."

"Are we included on that list?"

Mark shook his head, "No, we're being reasonable human beings."

"It's great to be on that list. We better get going."

After a few more words, they stumble out of the doorway, their uniforms buttoned unevenly.

"Alright, Kagohn, everyone is here."

"Good, now follow me. I see ya all very excited, I have another story to tell you."

He looks over, seeing a kangaroo, "Ahhh, girl, you're looking so fine right now."

It seems somewhat interested, and then it descends into the shade offered by the trees.

As the golden beams of light that have settled over the near soundless forest, it is a place of beauty with flowers and bark of many colours leaching onto the ground. The grass is soft, and the rushing water is calming as it breaks over the mossy stones. Every now and then, a creature appears from the shade, its eyes alight with the morning the golden sun.

Andrew looks around him, hearing the leaves rustling.

As they pass over the river, the moss and mud clings to their shoes.

Mark skips over them lightly, doing his best to avoid it, "This is nasty."

Kagohn helps a few across the raging river, turning his gaze up to trees as a round of laughter breaks through the foliage.

He points up into the sky, "Ahhh, and there is the pair of Whims and Greta."

Up high in the tree, there are two kookaburras, their chests puffed out proudly as they laugh.

Mark shakes his head at this attempt at music, "Really, there just laughing."

Kagohn raises his hand into the air, "It's time for another story. Morning, you two, don't you look just stunning today?"

They cackle, their eyes gleaming good-humouredly, "You know it!"

Andrew mutters softly to his cabin-mates, "They certainly seem to agree..."

"Of course they do, I mean I guess they're the loudest."

"Not like that's much of an achievement."

After muttering for a while, Kagohn begins his story, as a few, black-scaled skinks appear on the rocks, resting and scampering around to catch the light as their forked tongues flicker out.

"One day, two little boys went into the bush..."

He emphasised his point by jumping into the treeline, "Their old man taught them how to make spears, boomerangs, how to track..."

Continuing to eye the birds, they follow close behind, "He said never to attack the old, river lizard that live in the long grass."

He passed through knee-high, and flicked aside the branches, "They decided to play a game with old boy, picking away at the lizard. They wanted to have a laugh."

Thomas asks reflectively, "So the moral of the story is to not anger a lizard?"

"Ohhh, yes, those boys learnt their lesson, he flattened them both with a sweep of his tail."

Mark mutters, "I'm noticing a pattern with these stories."

"Yes, then our two handsome friends started to laugh. And they never grew tired of it."

A moment later, he came to a pause, outstretching his hand to stop them.

"Ahhhh, look at them, sticking to the shade, been a while since I've seen you, Red."

A gang of kangaroos were gathered beneath the trees, looking up from their grassy-beds.

One of them got onto its feet, walking on over, "Still nervous, mate, don't you recognise me?"

It snuffled his hand, before kicking off and returning to his group, "That's Red alright, now let's hope you've been paying attention."

Startled from their walk, the scouts spun to face him, "What do you mean by that....?"

Kagohn exclaims, "You'll have to make your way back to camp."

With his mouth dropping, Andrew stared incredulously, "You're joking, right?"

He throws his hands into the air, his laugh almost a match for a kookaburras, "No, not at all, mate. Yup, yup, time for ya all to get going."

It is a seamless sight, with all the trunks, branches and leaves forming together.

Everyone immediately takes off, following the river and ducking through the trees.

Andrew looks back to his group, kicking away at the dirt.

Mark leans against one of the trees, careful to keep the ants from crawling over his shoes, "So, you got anything?"

Thomas jabs his head towards a fallen log, "Yeah, we go back to an old friend."

Mark doesn't get it at first, "Physics....?"

Andrew points past him, "No, the log over there, we use it to get back."

Looking over to the rotting log, they shrug defeated, "You got anything better?"

"Other than running down with the rest of em, no, I don't."

"Guess it's decided then, we need to get onto it quickly."

Taking off at a run, they seize the ends and the middle, allowing it to roll into the water.

Without pause for concern, they leap on the wooden log before it has the chance to be pulled downstream. Swallowing a mouthful of saltwater, Mark begins to panic, until Thomas hurls him upwards onto it, "Hug it as tight as you can."

Mark claws into it, "You don't have to tell me twice."

With their makeshift boat, they cling onto it as it smashes through the water, going beneath the surface to reveal many water-dwellers gazing confused at their intrusion.

The skinks are no better, watching as the log rips back into the air.

Being thrown forcibly skywards, they crash onto the rotting log, "Help us, you bastards!"

Trying desperate to reach out for anything that can break them free of this wild ride, they have no choice but to remain, "Why do we have to turn everything into a race?"

Andrew shakes his head, feeling the nausea-inducing water roll over his back, "I have a better question."

Thomas finishes his sentence, "Why are we such idiots?"

Mark is begging desperately, his long hair plastered over his face, "Do we break off?"

"It's best we stay on for now, we're going downhill. Getting off this ride won't be safe."

Resigned to their fate, they continue down the water.

Until, a familiar set of rooves emerge, an almost indiscernible shape that appears among the woodland haze, "We're almost there!"

Andrew hugs the log tighter, the flakes and ants spilling over his head, "Ummm, guys, look ahead..."

In front of them, the trees grow thinner and thinner towards the end, "Ohhh shit!"

The foliage holds up the golden sun, beyond is a clear-blue sky, "It looks like we've made it."

Every second they draw closer, as the water disappears from sight, "We're going to die."

As the first part of the log passes over the edge, they begin running up to the other end.

Finally as they tip over, Andrew screams at the top of his lungs, Mark looks like a Koloa reaching out for the security that the log offered, while Thomas with his brown hair flattened onto his forehead, springs away from their now, sinking vessel, into the pond. Their entry back into the camp is marked by the log thundering into the pond.

It seems that the critters inside, share these sentiments, spilling into the water.

It stands for a moment, a flag of nature before it crashes onto the bank.

After touching the bottom of the pond, they swim back to the surface to the mocking applause of the scouts.

Resurfacing first, Mark punches furiously at the water, "We're alive!"

Andrew gasps, looks around and wishes to disappear, "Yeah, that's great, just great."

Thomas, seeming to be the most natural in the water, waddles up to the surface, "You know, maybe we should've avoided that one."

"Come on, guys, and gotta join em."

With great reluctance they walk out of the salty-water, their hair soaking wet and uniforms clinging to their skin.

Kagohn is dumbstruck, "Wow, you guys are crazy! That was cool."

"I'm glad someone enjoyed that."

"If there was a prize for a dramatic return, it'd be you guys."

As the afternoon rapidly draws to a close, they settle down by the campfire, playing the part of drowned rats, trying to peel off their uniforms while their hairs remains stubbornly in place, rife with disorder. As they reach the stalls, a song it picked up by the others;



“He jumped from 40,000 feet without a parachute!”

The scouts scream it back, holding their flaming marshmallows in the air.

“He ain’t gonna jump no more!”

“...a hell of a way to die!”

Starting over, Andrew picks away at the debris still in his hair, “He ain’t gonna jump no more.”

“He landed on the tarmac like a 12-ton bag of bricks!”

Mark snorts, “This is quite something, don’t you think?”

“Almost dying....?”

“Yeah, and also having these guys sing a song about our near-death experience.”

The song moves onto the next round of lyrics, “He ain’t gonna jump no more.”

“They scraped him off the pavement like a lump of strawberry jam!”

As they went towards the end of the song, they were wielding their flaming sticks, painting the night with fire, “Put him in an envelope and sent him home to mum!”

Mark mutters drily, as he vigorously dries his hair, “I’d love that.”

“...a hell of a way to die!”

Thomas had a heavy dose of sarcasm, “Except that.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to die.”

Another screaming round, “She put him on a mantelpiece for everyone to see....!”

“He started to smell so she flushed him down the loo!”

After they were dry, they settled down with the others, watching the stars twinkle upon the canvas of the night.

It wasn’t long before they stumbled home, ready for the comfort of their mattresses.

“I hope we don’t have to taste dirt and salt anymore.”

“Don’t hope for anything, mate, it’ll be a disaster.”

Settling in for the night, the morning began with a *bang!*

Shaken alert by the sound, “What is that sound?”

“I think Kagohn is going to town on a log.”

Another round of hammering took place, blocking out his words.

“What....?”

“Kagohn is hammering.....”

“What....?”

“Just get up and look outside.”

They arrive to the centre of camp, watching him fashion together a boat.

“Morning all, it’s now time for you to go on a cruise.”

Thomas shook his head in wonder, “What kind of challenge is this?”

“The one where you make your own vessel, it seems Team MAT already knows how this works.”

“Okay, we had no idea....”

Kagohn calls out, “Everyone, head down to the creek. We are gonna have some fun.”

A moment later, they split off into teams, “Well, I guess this time we can make something that is less aerodynamic....”

Andrew adds with a slightly flamboyant gesture, “And one that isn’t a log.”

Mark relaxes as well, picking away at the wooden trunks and materials left by, “How do we put this together?”

“Have one loop over the other; the rope is to tie it all in place.”

Using the branches as a leverage point, they tie a bundle of branches into something resembling a nest, “I think we’ve got something.....”

“Yeah, maybe it’ll stick the landing.”

“We won’t be riding it into the pond, if we do, our days are numbered.”

Filling in the last sections with a haphazard arrangement of rope and chipped branches, they hear a familiar sound, the kookaburras are mocking them.

“Shut up.”

Mark fixes up the rope, “I don’t want to taste the water again.”

“We don’t even have access to hammers or nails, how are we meant to get this thing together?”