

# THE BUBBLIDS



**aaron ware**

## **BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK**

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**BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK**

**For all the Guests that have visited our  
torture chamber...**

## **chapter one**

### **...AND INTRODUCING, THE BUBBLIDS**

**I**f you had even the slightest idea what sort of day young Dincey-Lee has had today, then you would know there is only really one option: draining, yet terribly drab. But of course, what else would one possibly expect?

She briskly walks along the drab, grey path towards her drab, grey house, ready for another drab, grey evening of mediocrity. And young Dincey-Lee certainly has no regrets about that.

Stepping into her multi-rock house- whose bland, uninspired interior was mindlessly excavated many centuries earlier, the young Bubblid relaxes back on her drab, grey couch fashioned out of a dried Kangaroo liver stuffed with Kookaburra feathers and camel fur. Despite the severe lack of excitement, she feels utterly fulfilled, ready to do it all again tomorrow as her eyelids slowly lower themselves down- if for no other reason than contentment.

And what of the other Bubblids? The many others that occupy the hidden gorge, situated in the centre of

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

a vast, dry desert; which itself lies in the heart of a cruel, harsh land in the middle of the ocean? Perhaps they skip with a spring in their step? Or maybe they laugh and sing their days away? Well, I'm afraid to tell you, that for most Bubblids, the answer is precisely as dull and boring as the average Bubblid's life should be. And they have zero regrets about that.

Almost as uninterested in social occasions as they are uninteresting to attend one with, Bubblids (or 'Bubblies', if you're *that* way inclined) don't typically care much for pleasantries as they rush towards their designated duties on the daily. Keeping their eyes focused on the path ahead with barely a smile cracked across their bland, grey faces, I honestly cannot express just how truly boring they are. In fact, it's putting me to sleep just thinking about their pitifully dull lives.

And yet, their existence is nothing short of important to us all, something they are well and truly aware of as the responsibility weighs heavily on their collective shoulders.

Drifting off slowly, her legs as tired as they are short, Dincey-Lee's eyes pop open as a thought pops into her mind. She springs to her wooden feet, clomping on the stone floor as she races into the space within the second excavated rock, her workshop. Holding her breath, Dincey's eyes instantly dart towards three bubbles floating in a large, wooden tub of water; a sigh of relief unwittingly releases from her body, sounding almost like a flute.

She kneels down, gently twirling her chunky, wooden fingers in the ice-cold water. The bubbles, which are no bigger than her head, bop up-and-down on the surface of the water, with tiny electric pulses bursting sporadically inside them. Dincey-Lee smiles at

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

her creations, the grains in the wood of her face form long smile lines around her large, black-and-white eyes. Her tired eyes, that is.

The young Bubblid rises to her feet, stretches out her short, stumpy arms, and yawns; her spine sounding like a symphony of rhythm sticks and maracas as it stretches out with the yawn.

“Nearly ready, kids- maybe next week.” She runs her permanently-damp fingers thru the dandelions that grow out of her head as hair normally would. “Maybe next week.” She repeats as she retreats back to her couch; yet again forgoing her Wombat-fur bed, in favour of a spot on the sofa, if only to use the rising sun’s bright morning beams as an alarm clock.

Being on dayshift, and without the comforts that we humans have come to take for granted- such as radio alarm clocks, vacuum cleaners, and surround sound systems, Bubblids have had to borrow and steal ideas from humans whenever the need has arisen- and only then has their access to said ideas been rather restricted- by law. And whilst necessity is indeed the mother of invention, Bubblids are in fact the guardians of invention, and that responsibility comes at a price. Many prices.

The moment the potent, orange sunlight hits Dincey-Lee’s peaceful face, her large, round eyes creak open with several blinks of adjustment. She wipes away the crusty, dry sap from under her eyes, and stretches her arms out with a long, loud yawn. After shaking her head violently, she springs to her feet, checks on her three bubbles- finding them bobbing away gently beneath the surface, then leaps out of the red cap gum-wood front door.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

Of course you and I, with our human habits, and nutritional needs, may need at least an hour or two of preparation to wake up properly, eat, and then beautify ourselves, Bubblids, with their lack of dietary needs-given the absence of a digestive system, are fuelled by their sole purpose. And whilst one may compare this behaviour to a hive of honey bees, or perhaps even a colony of worker ants, one can be assured that both bees and ants are well versed in how to fill their spare time with non-work related activities. But not Dincey-Lee and her fellow unsuccessful folk. Nope, they're destined to wake up, work all day- *or night*, return home, and then sleep.

Dincey-Lee's short, thin legs bounce rhythmically as she swerves left-to-right along the winding path, avoiding collisions with equally-focussed Bubblids. One tall, thin Bubblid stops in front of her, his eyes smaller than Dincey's, but his head almost twice as large, and flowerless dandelion stems protrude with stylish twists out of his wooden scalp. He leans down, drawing her attention away from the path ahead of her.

"Humbo-Bob!" She almost coughs up. "Didn't see you there."

"Walk with me to work?" He blandly asks.

"As always." Dincey-Lee sort-of smiles at him.

"You're running a tad late."

"As always." She faintly frowns at him, then smiles ever-so-slightly, before asking; "What is your vote for today? Arts, science, or another round of sports?"

"Sport has brought us nothing of late. Waste of time- the potential simply isn't there."

"It's never a waste of time, just not the right ideas, is all." Dincey-Lee remains optimistic; a position she has no choice but to take given her role as team leader.



## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

After Humbo-Bob hooks his long, wooden arm around Dincey's, they escort each other down towards the lake in the centre of the gorge, where giant palm leaves have been sewn together to create a great, arching canopy that spans the entire western shoreline. Underneath the canopy, hundreds of Bubblids are bustling away, back-and-forth from the lake, to their workstations; many with a giant, glowing bubble in their damp hands.

“Art might be a worthy shot.”

“Art it is.” Dincey-Lee nods.

“There's Asta.” Humbo-Bob raises his spare arm out in front, stretching one long, damp, wooden finger towards a tall Bubblid with a dandelion Mohawk, blandly chatting to a Bubblid from an opposing team.

“Fraternizing with the competition, as usual.” Dincey-Lee softly scoffs as she surprises her statuesque sister-made.

“I am not.” Asta whips around, almost losing her balance; her wooden cheeks somehow tinged with red from blushing; “You know Jimbo-Bill, he lives on your path, D.L., surely you've met?”

“Good morning, Dincey!” The competing Bubblid smiles broadly, his thick neck, bubbled joints, and round belly making the new-arrivals instantly jealous; “Asta was just twisting my arm, asking about the ceremony, I can't wait!” His joyous personality causes their jealousy to double- for the growth of personality is the *most* valued of rewards for a successful Bubblid.

“That I was.” Asta nods, then places her hand on the stranger's shoulder; “They've scheduled us on the past two ceremonies- they wouldn't do it to us again, I will be there this year.”

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“You two can rub shoulders later, Asta, we’re going to be late.” Dincey-Lee links her arm around her sister-made’s arm, swinging her around; away from the latest victim of her flirtations.

“Bye!” Asta calls out unenthusiastically. Jimbo-Bill squeaks an intimidated response, clearly rather embarrassed by the situation.

“Was that necessary?” Dincey asks.

“Well, I like him.” Asta blurts out blandly.

“And any other boy that gives you attention.” Dincey reminds her.

“So?” Asta starts to smirk.

“Sew threads. We have a job to do, Sis.”

“Why waste your time? Bubblids can’t find love until they retire- and even then it’s extremely rare.” Humbo-Bob slowly places his proverbial foot in his metaphorical mouth.

Asta stops in her tracks, her arms unlinking from her team; remnants of a scandalized look on her pretty wooden face.

“What an absolute splinter.” She lightly stamps her foot, albeit rather weakly.

Dincey-Lee, however, simply doesn’t have the time for such mediocre melodrama; “Get on with it, we’re voting art today and all, what say you?”

“Great, the one field that’s drowning in ideas.” Asta re-links her arms into her sister’s as the trio set off again; “Why would that be luckier than sport?”

“Why was I so lucky that I arrived here with you?” D.L.’s calm response emanates warmth.

“Harsh.” Asta vaguely laughs, more of a cough; “That’ll keep, you know.”

“Jimbo-Bill works with the Fiffamay Fink.” Humbo-Bob interrupts; “You do realize that, don’t you?”

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“Yes- why not try to sabotage the worst team going?”

“Sabotage? Is that what you call it?” Dincey-Lee asks sceptically.

“Yes.”

“Nonsense. You know that’s awfully dangerous. Fiffamay isn’t anointed like her sister-made, she’s ambitious.”

“Ah, but, that’s the idea, Sis- Bathenda Fink is in charge, why wouldn’t we want to get in on their inner circle?” Asta reminds them.

“That’s fine and all if we’d ever had any success.” Dincey begins to sound worried.

“Something to show for it.” Humbo-Bob adds.

“I just thought it’d help.” Asta shrugs her pointed shoulders.

“Just... be careful, I worry about you.” Dincey-Lee leans into her sister gently as they reach the final stretch of path which leads to the canopy entrance. “I worry about the whole team.”

“We just need to refurbish our equipment is all.” Humbo nods; “I’ve been saying it for weeks.”

“We can’t afford it, not until an idea hits.”

“I can still sabo-” Asta begins.

“NO.” Both Dincey and Humbo interrupt her.

“Harsh.” Asta half-laughs. Well, she feels the laughter inside her, escaping from her mouth, and yet nothing comes out verbally, as usual.

“We’ll get by- many other Bubblids have much worse materials than us.” D.L. adds.

“Most nets are ripped, both of ours are intact.” Humbo states nigh-on-proudly.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“And have you even seen Fiffamay’s trumpet? It’s as bent as a banana, how she’s snagged any success at all is beyond my imagination.”

“Maybe that’s where we’re going wrong?” Asta suggests with a tilt of the head.

“Maybe, sure- but I’m not breaking ours just to try.” Dincey-Lee softly echoes across the lake.

The trio enter through the tall, black, camel rib gates, and venture across the entrance atrium towards the series of round crevices that house the Bubblid booths; among them, their third-level workstation.

After venturing up the wooden stairs, and past several hundred booths, they eventually arrive at their own to find two Bubblids sitting patiently in silence in front of a large, wooden contraption that looks almost like a toaster crossed with a church organ.

“Guess what?” The shortest Bubblid, Mora-Lou, challenges Dincey-Lee and co. the instant they arrive.

“They’ve scheduled us on for ceremony day.” The game is spoiled by Kether-Lou, a tall, slim Bubblid with trimmed, mostly-flowerless dandelions on her head.

“AGAIN?!” Asta, Dincey-Lee, and Humbo-Bob all kinda-cry out in unison; more of a loud talking.

“Again. It’s that Fiffamay, I just know it!” Kether-Lou practically growls.

“She loves torturing us.” Mora blandly states.

“She loves torturing you.” Kether throws a listless look towards her leader.

“Me?” Dincey-Lee gently gasps, mostly neutral and/or poker faced.

“She still blames you for-” Mora begins.

“Thinks you did it to take over the team.” Kether interjects vaguely.

“So silly, I’d never hurt any Bubblid.” Dincey-Lee slowly shakes her head in disbelief.

“That’s the Finks for you.” Kether-Lou rolls her small, beady eyes. “Thinks what they want, Finks get what they want.

“Asta can definitely stay away from Jimbo then.” Dincey declares deeply, then twists between her co-workers to stand in front of them all, before placing her wet fists on her hips; “Hold up a second...” She looks around the booth, counting four Bubblids, one control panel, and a wooden cupboard which stands against the booth wall; “Canver-Lee?”

“Late as usual.” Kether-Lou wryly responds.

“Ah well, we know what his vote will be for.” Dincey-Lee brushes off her teammate’s tardiness.

“Sport.” Everybody in the booth blandly blurts out, even Dincey, who then goes on to ask;

“Anybody want to try Politics today?” She looks directly at Kether-Lou.

“Definitely not me.” Kether runs her damp fingers through her self-trimmed dandelion hair- of which only twelve, long flowered stems rise up out from a sea of shorter stems.

“Politics out, then. Science? One vote from Mora. Who would like to try Art today?” The leader asks, followed by Humbo-Bob, Kether-Lou and Dincey-Lee raising their hands; “Art it is then. Ready for a win today?”

The half-hearted responses range from inching-on-enthusiastic, to downright-depressive- from Asta. Still, Dincey-Lee knows their mission comes first, and thus, swipes up her net, and ventures down to the lake, with one thought on her mind; *‘What absolute nonsense, if Fiffamay Fink really has a target on my back, this net*

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

*would have been shredded to pieces long before now!*' the voice inside her head sounding lively, almost excited. Terribly unbecoming of the bland, emotionless creature that begins to swirl her net in the lake waters alongside Edilo-Bob, an equally short, but thrice-successful Bubblid who is nearing retirement.

"Best of luck, Dincey! What're you after today? Still on sport?" He sounds chipper, she does not;

"Art today, Mr. Edilo." She calmly states.

"Ooh, superb! I got these arms from a lucky art bubble!" Edilo excitedly waves his thick, wooden arms in front of Dincey-Lee's face. And if she hadn't a lake-full of respect for the seasoned Bubblid, she may very well have been offended by his actions.

"Well, I hope we're as lucky as you then- gotchya." She scoops up a struggling bubble within her net.

"Are you sure it's one of ours?" Asta asks from behind her.

"Positive." Dincey-Lee refrains from rolling her eyes; having explained how the lake works to her disinterested sister-made numerous times. "Trumpet ready?"

"All ready to go- just waiting for you." Asta turns and re-joins their team, leaving Dincey-Lee to look out over the lake, where hundreds of Bubblids are scooping through the waters, also looking for that one bubble that may burst their luck wide open.

The leader looks down at the translucent ball throwing a tantrum within the net, then up at Edilo-Bob as the veteran skips his way up the stairs towards his own team in booth two-five-zero-eight-C.

"Here goes nothing." Dincey-Lee scuffs her feet as she returns back to her workstation, and levers the bubble toward Kether-Lou, while Mora-Lou flips out two

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

wooden panels of knobs and switches on the “organ side” of the control desk.

Kether, the tallest member of their team, uses her damp hands to carefully slip the spumescent sphere into the largest opening of a wood-and-metal, cone-shaped contraption that sits atop of a wooden tripod; the trumpet’s wide opening pointing toward the control desk. Humbo-Bob leans over the ancient desk, and wraps all eight fingers around a wooden handle that protrudes out of the top’s surface. A soft hissing sound emanates out of the desk-top as he pulls on the handle, releasing a square frame of twisted branches bordering a collage of dried leaves which form a blank canvas. He repeats the action with an adjacent handle, this time releasing a round canvas; its branch-frame speckled with moss.

Dincey-Lee moves over to the side of the control desk, and looks over at Asta, who stands behind the trumpet contraption.

“Sorry I’m late.” A monotone male’s voice catches the now-focussed team off-guard.

“Never to mind.” Dincey-Lee politely purses her lips in an attempt at a humoured smile.

“So what’s the idea?” Canver-Lee asks as he takes his position in front of the square canvas.

“A new cheerleading routine.” Dincey-Lee states; “At least, that’s what it looked like.”

“Hop-in-the-what-now?” Asta would look shocked-if she could. “Cheerleading is sport.”

“No, it’s arts.” Mora-Lou responds from her position in from of the round frame’s control panel.

“They compete for trophies, do they not?” Humbo-Bob attempts to ease their concerns, yet fails.

“See- that’s sport.” Asta argues.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“It’s dancing.” Dincey-Lee decides.

“It’s sport.” Asta crosses her arms.

“It is classified as both.” Kether-Lou inches on impatient.

“Keth’s correct- it’s just one of those things.” Canver-Lee shrugs.

“That settles it. We get on with it, then?” Dincey-Lee smiles softly, then turns her attention back to Asta, and asks; “Trumpet loaded?” Asta nods, D.L. looks at Humbo-Bob, who stands next to the wedged-in bubble.

Humbo nods, then asks; “Where to today, boss?”

“Let’s take it over Atlanta- see who’s about.” At Dincey’s words, Humbo-Bob turns several dials that line the rim of the trumpet, while Canver-Lee frantically flicks a series of switches that line his control panel.

“Atlanta, Georgia, United States of America- arriving in the autumn.” The late-arrival announces.

“In that case- taking it out at medium speed.” Humbo-Bob twists another knob.

“Duly noted.” Dincey nods.

“Screens.” Kether-Lou declares after a leafy suburban street appears across both canvases.

“Marker.” Asta replies.

“And... fire!” Somehow, a smidgen of excitement escapes from Dincey-Lee as Asta blows a chest-full of air into the smallest end of the trumpet, causing the bubble within it to shoot towards the square, then disappear, only to re-appear a second later, floating down the tree-lined street.



## **chapter two**

### **BUBBLID IS AS BUBBLID DOES**

**N**obody sees it, but it's there. It glides across the afternoon air with grace; a silent hunter looking for its prey. The electrical pulses within it spark up suddenly, it drops into a dive; looping around itself several times in the process.

"Less pressure from above." Dincey-Lee commands of her key driver.

"Less pressure it is." Kether-Lou nods, then pumps a wooden handle back and forth quickly, while Mora-Lou frantically taps a button beside her.

"Closing in on a potential." Canver announces. "A number of them as a matter-of-fact."

"Could this be it?" Asta whispers to Dincey-Lee.

"With any luck." The leader sighs.

"Her- that one there." Mora-Lou pipes up; "She looks like she's in charge."

"She's our best bet. What are the wind conditions like down there, Canver?" D.L. asks.

"Mild, but it'll still take some work cornering the target by the looks of it."

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“She’ll have to take a break at some stage- hover over by the bleachers- try to catch her there.”

“Are you sure? There’s non-potentials watching.” Kether-Lou reminds her.

“Good point.” Dincey-Lee nods, then changes tactic; “Keep in close proximity of the leader as much as you can.”

“She keeps moving around, boss.” Mora marginally moans.

“Everybody on your toes.” Dincey-Lee leans in, squinting her eyes at the senior high school student; “Have we got a name?”

“The back of her uniform says Vazquez.” Replies Kether-Lou; “Unless that’s her school’s name?”

“Come on, Ms. Vazquez- a little to the left.” Dincey-Lee peeps the preppy pupil projected within the canvas screen.

“No, it goes ‘arm-arm, kick, land, hips- hips- hips- booty shake!’ Ok?! Get it, got it, good.” The flesh-and-bone Ms. Vazquez shouts at her team of cheerleaders.

“You said arm-arm- HEAD, *then* kick!” A plump, blonde cheerleader with glasses whines.

“No I didn’t!” The leader snaps.

“Yes you did!” All fifteen high school cheerleaders- mostly female (with three exceptions), sing out in unison.

“Whatever- let’s go from the top- I wanna see sass and attitude this time!”

“Uh, Paloma?” A tall, slim American-Japanese girl puts her hand up. “What are we chanting with this?”

“I don’t know yet- still gotta write the cheers.”

“I liked it when Bella was the head.” A short, ginger-haired boy whispers to his half-Japanese friend.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“And Bella’s not here anymore, is she?” Paloma Vazquez scrunches her face up at the awkward nerd she was forced to put on the team; “And if you like, you could not be here too. C’mon, guys! Our boys are relying on us. From the top!”

Elsewhere; “Quickly now, try to snag her at the stereo.” Dincey-Lee motions to her drivers, Kether-Lou and Mora-Lou.

“I’m trying, but she’s too active.” replies Kether.

“This was a terrible idea.” Mora-Lou wisps a whine.

“Like Edilo-Bob always tells us: there are no terrible ideas, just terrible executions.” Dincey nods.

“Yeah, you say that now.” Kether-Lou cracks.

“I say we try another town.” Asta suggests.

“I say we try another bubble.” Mora adds.

“I say, dampen the grass at her feet, Canver- we can try to catch her when she slips.” Dincey-Lee decides.

“This is why you’re the boss, boss- I can send an impulse to the gardener to turn on the sprinkler momentarily.”

“Perfect.” Dincey-Lee watches the round screen, which changes over to a maintenance shed on the edge of the football field. “Set the impulse to a level two, no, a seven- a lot of distractions in those sheds.”

“Impulse sent.”

The Bubblids watch nervously as the eyes of a middle-aged man in filthy bib-and-brace overalls switch over. He reaches for the handle of the maintenance shed door, \*BANG!\* A football hits the metal wall merely inches away from the handle, startling the man.

“NO. NO DISTRACTIONS!” Dincey-Lee’s voice rises louder than considered polite.

“Watch yaselves, kids! Gave me a fright there.” The gardener laughs as he tosses the pigskin back to three

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

male students in red and black football uniforms; their heads looking awfully small in-between their plastic shoulder pads.

“Accident, Mr. Renfern.” The tallest student apologizes as he catches the ball. “Cutting the lawns this afternoon?”

“No-no, just had...” But Mr. Renfern trails off in thought; “Huh, that’s... odd...”

“Memory loss is a sign of old-age, Sir!” A short, stocky student with freckles jokes as the boys run off, leaving the janitor to laugh at their cheek.

“Send it again, Canver.” Dincey-Lee can’t quite pinpoint the panic partially pumping through her limbs.

“That’s not how impulses work.”

“Never to mind- switch back over to Ms. Vazquez.”

“She’s moving around too quickly, Dince- what should we do?” Kether-Lou asks.

“We need to corner her somehow.” The leader leans into the control desk.

“Just like how you cornered Phippie-Lee before you killed him?” The snide, shrill voice causes Dincey-Lee to tense up.

“Good day to you, Fiffamay.” D.L. breathes out without turning to face their visitor.

“Always a good day when you’re me.” Fiffamay Fink enters the booth; “Look at the state of this place, the disrespect shown to his memory.” She waves her thick arms in the air in a dramatic gesture.

“Go away, Fiffamay.” Kether-Lou blandly rolls her oval-shaped eyes.

“I can do what I want, actually.” Fiffamay lifts her knobbly nose in the air; “It’s what makes me successful, and you lot so... you.”

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“It’s *our* booth.” Humbo-Bob attempts to drive her away, to no avail.

“Stolen in death.” Fiffamay laughs a false, high-pitched laugh.

“Has anybody seen- oh, Miss Fink, there you are, Bathenda’s searching for you.” Edilo-Bob smiles as he enters the booth; “She looks rather angry.”

Fiffamay’s half-expanded body tenses up slightly, noticed only by Edilo-Bob.

“Best of luck, I know you’re going to need it with those awful ideas.” She snaps with contempt.

“There are no awful ideas, just awful Bubblids.” Edilo-Bob chimes in, glaring down at Fiffamay.

“They are, aren’t they?” The Fink Bubblid misreads his intentions; “It *is* awful to butcher your leader.”

“Yes, we know- we’re forced to look at your haircut.” Edilo-Bob joyously exclaims with a broad smile.

Fiffamay, however, storms off in a huff, leaving Dincey-Lee and her team to barely beam with pride.

“Cheers to you, Mr. Edilo.” Dincey-Lee attempts to shake his hand; the dampness of both palms causes their grip to slip numerous times.

“Don’t worry about her, she just-” Edilo begins.

“Thinks I killed Phip.” Dincey half hangs her head.

“I highly doubt that to be true. You know, I saw him that day.” The veteran recalls.

“You did?” Humbo-Bob’s eyes widen.

“Why did you never say anything?” Asta asks.

“I saw him wading through the lake waters- I think he was looking for something.”

“We searched the lake.” Dincey-Lee adds. “Twice.”

“He couldn’t have drowned- it’s impossible for us to sink properly.” Canver-Lee reminds them.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“So what do you think happened to him?” D.L. delicately asks.

“I think he found what he was looking for, and that was enough for him- he wouldn’t be the first to retire from life prematurely out of contentment.”

“Why would he do that?” Mora-Lou takes her eyes off the canvas screen for a moment; Edilo-Bob simply shrugs with both damp palms open out to the side.

“I miss him.” Dincey hangs her head.

“He was your first leader, of course you do!” The seven Bubblids momentarily stand in respectful silence.

“We should get back to our bubble- thank you for your help, Edilo.” Asta bows her head in respect.

“Cheerleaders? Ha! Good luck getting them to settle down long enough to get a hit!” He chuckles.

“Tell me about it.” Kether-Lou lightly rolls her eyes while Edilo-Bob disappears from the booth with a warm, hearty chuckle.

“AND- FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT!” Paloma Vazquez shouts at her team.

Sadly for Dincey-Lee and her team, five, six, seven, eight hours roll by and not a single bubble hits its target. After failing to inspire the young Latin-American cheerleader, to then trying their hand snagging a win with song lyrics for a busker on the streets of London, the team soon decided to try fishing with an idea for a brand-new tabletop board game concept, when the tintinnabulation of the afternoon shift bells echoed across the canopy-covered shore.

“Reel it in!” Dincey-Lee orders her drivers.

“On it, boss.” Kether-Lou begins turning a crank embedded in the control panel, her body sounding like an orchestra of maracas. Round and around, as fast as

she can, causing the bubble on the round screen to rise up into the air, higher and higher, rapidly ascending until it hits the clouds.

“Now moving east, twenty-five klicks.” Canver calls out. “Approaching re-entry field.”

“Get ready to drop on my call... annnnd NOW!” Dincey-Lee points to Kether and Mora, who both slam clenched fists onto a large, red button that sits in the centre of their personal panels; the buttons wheeze like pack-a-day smokers as they’re hit.

“Losing altitude, prepare for re-entry in ten... nine... eight...” Canver informs his team.

Asta, meanwhile, stands in front of the square screen with a larger, handle-less, spider-silk net in her hands; ready to catch the returning bubble as it shoots towards the crook of a waterfall on their canvas screens.

“INCOMING.” Canver loudly declares as the bubble disappears into the foot of the waterfall- only to shoot out of the square screen almost instantly.

Asta leaps backwards, catching the speeding bullet in her net.

“That’s it for today, good job, Bubblids.” Dincey-Lee smiles at her exhausted team. “Better luck tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s the ceremony.” Mora reminds her.

“Then we will have less competition. Don’t be late.” She smiles at Canver-Lee.

One by one, the Bubblids replace their equipment, say their goodbyes, and then retreat from their workplace back to their drab, grey houses, ready to do it all again tomorrow. Dincey-Lee, however, lingers back in the booth, ensuring their equipment is securely locked away; unable to recognize- nor indulge, the empty feeling inside of her.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

Roughly an hour later, after yet another mindless walk back to her dual-rock home, with the last shreds of sunlight disappearing from the highest tips of the surrounding gorge, Dincey-Lee breathes a sigh of relief as she steps into her workshop, finding her own, hand-crafted bubbles happily bobbing along under the water, slightly larger than the last time she checked.

“Let’s see if we can get a picture...” She kneels down beside the largest tub- whose wooden planks are bonded together tightly using pulped tree-bark and sap.

Her damp fingers lightly caress the juvenile idea, the electric pulses inside burst sporadically as if they sense her touch. Streaks of ten different colours start swishing across the bubble’s face: red, indigo, white, cyan, orange, black, navy, green, violet, and silver. One by one the colours swipe across as if painted on by a brush. As Dincey-Lee removes her fingers, the colours start to swirl around themselves, then each other.

\*DONK!\* \*SPLINK!\* A large gumnut lands in the water a second after hitting her in the forehead. She looks up, spotting nothing but her empty yard and the giant fallen logs that border the property.

\*DONK! SPLINK!\* She sees this one coming, but is too slow to stop it. She scoops up the gumnuts, lest they burst her bubble, and throws them back out of her open window before venturing out through the door-less back archway.

“What are you working on?” A disembodied voice calls out from behind the back log.

“Nothing in particular.” Dince-Lee lies to her sister.

“Look up.” Asta suggests as she appears over the opposite side of the log fence.

Dincey-Lee follows her sister-made’s suggestion, and cranes her neck up to the sky above. As if the



## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

colours in her bubble had come to life; reds, pinks, oranges, yellows, purples; all tied together with jagged stitches and slashes of blue.

“Magnificent.” Dincey states as she joins her sister on top of the log; both facing towards their respective rock houses.

“Long day today.” Asta stretches out her long legs.

“Long as any- at least ceremony days are less strenuous.” D.L. can’t take her emotionless eyes off the heavenly sunset. “And Fiffamay won’t be there.”

Asta crosses her arms; “She really gets to you.”

“Not really, I just-”

“Just talking to me, I know you like I know the dry back of my hand.”

“I know- but if I let her upset me, then it may affect my growth... if we ever have any success.”

“We will. And it may- but it also may not. Is that worth the torture?”

“It’s not worth the trouble with Bathenda.”

“Fair call.” Asta twists around, and lies back on the log with her head in Dincey’s lap. Both sisters stare up at the sky silently for several seconds, minutes even; neither needing to say another word on the matter as each of the colours above start to melt into one another and darken. A single star glistens among a sea of purple blotched with pink. “Four thousand years of Bubblid brilliance and our species is still marvelling at the skies as if we’d never seen one before.”

Asta’s words linger in Dincey-Lee’s mind as she closes her eyes, her fingers twirling the Mohawk of dandelions on her sister’s head.

The next morning, before the sun has had a chance to arch over the Pacific Ocean, Dincey-Lee finds herself

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

wide awake, staring at the coarse, twisted shadows that rock back and forth on the blank, grey canvas which is her lounge room wall. Unable to journey any further through her bland dreams, she finds herself rising to her wooden feet, and venturing into her workshop.

Finding her rapidly-growing bubbles contently glistening in the darkness, D.L. turns on her knobbly heels without so much as a conscious thought, and heads straight out of her front door. She stops at the edge of her property, stretching out her short arms with a whistling yawn before scuffing her feet up the lane, towards the canopy of booths.

Passing several Bubblids heading to-or-from work along the way, Dincey-Lee finds herself unfamiliar with the majority of them, on account of working the day-shift for most of her life. And whilst she politely greets them with a genuine-yet-monotone “Good morning!” almost every single one of them responds back with a cheerful, chipper, excited, or even joyous greeting; and even the three well-developed Bubblids who snapped a rude, grumpy response had exhibited ten-times more personality and inflection in their response than Dincey-Lee and her team have ever shown- combined.

“Night shift must be fruitful.” She whispers to herself as she watches two half-grown night shift workers laughing as they exit the black camel rib gates.

“I know! I couldn’t believe it! I nearly broke my neck from laughing so hard.” The taller Bubblid, a female, wipes runny sap out of her eyes as she chokes out her words; her co-worker almost doubled over in laughter.

“Excuse me?” Dincey-Lee approaches the pair.

“Yes, li’l lady?” The male Bubblid- who is rather rotund apart from two skinny legs, responds while also wiping runny sap out of his own eyes.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“What’s it like working at night time?”

“Take a look, sister- you don’t get hips like these working in the sun!” The female twists around, waving her large, plump bottom back-and-forth. Dincey-Lee can’t quite comprehend the acute feeling inside her chest; even if she is well aware of what jealousy is.

“I should get my team on nights.”

“Good luck with that one, there’s a waiting list a metre long!” The man’s eyes squish slightly in a sign of empathy; “Took us eight ceremonies until we got to the front of the line.”

“Bonkers. That’s how long I’ve been alive.” D.L. dryly states.

“It’s still worth applying though, pip-pip!” The beautiful Bubblid with the bountiful booty blows Dincey a kiss as the pair bounce away into the dim morning light; their arms now linked.

“I think that was Phippie-Lee’s successor!” The male’s voice rings out in the still air.

A sudden coldness runs down Dincey-Lee’s spine as she watches the pair disappear over the hill. Unable to grasp the sensation, she whips back around and heads through the gates; images of Phippie-Lee fading in and out of her mind’s eye.

Turning left, instead of heading across the atrium, she reaches the water’s edge before realizing where her feet had taken her. She stares across the water to the small island in the centre- and the important tree stump that encompasses the entire span of the islet. To her right, dozens of Bubblids race back-and-forth with their nets; their frantic actions barely disturbing the mirror surface of the lake.

She steps into the freezing water, kicking her right foot around gently. Turning to her right, she begins to

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

walk along, wading through the waters as Phippie-Lee is reported to have done. He flashes through her mind again, clearer than before.

Eventually arriving at her regular fishing spot, she stops, letting her feet sink into the soft, squishy mud. Then, without so much as a warning, yet with a faint, familiar voice in her mind commanding her actions, she turns her back to the lake, then falls backwards.

\*KAPLISH!\* the thin Bubblid barely makes as splash as her stiffened body hits the surface. She bobs underneath the water momentarily, before resurfacing again; floating on her back with her eyes closed. The ice-cold water tickles more than it chills; in fact, she feels rather content.

“Oh!” She unwittingly gasps as a soft, round object hits her leg underneath the water, instantly followed by two more sensations on her hip and back. “Enough of that, Bubs, not yet time to go.” Her mouth purses in a half-smile; but the bubbles below the water don’t listen.

They submerge further down, before rising up again, knocking Dincey-Lee wherever they can. She bounces up and down with the forces of their impatient nudges. One by one, more of her team’s ideas join in; each bumping into D.L. as if they were a child needing a restroom and their mother is too busy flirting with the cute man behind the shop counter- not that I know that that feels like... *Moving on...* But alas, these are indeed just impatient idea bubbles, waiting to fulfil their destiny.

“Later on, Bubs.” Dincey-Lee lingers near laughter; “When the team is in.”

This time, luckily, most of the bubbles seem to take the hint, and opt instead to sink beneath their leader in order to lie in waiting.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

All except one pesky idea that won't seem to leave her alone. It circles beneath her left shoulder, round and around like a shark, sporadically rising up to nudge her neck with excitement; Dincey-Lee finds herself soothed by the motion, almost content. Her eyelids start to droop, a yawn escapes from her mouth.

"Good, let's hope she drowns!" A snooty, snide voice violates the air, catching Dincey-Lee off-guard.

She loses her balance on the water; and sinks beneath the surface with a pitiful splashing of water.

Fiffamay Fink and her two teammates- both female, scream clearly-false laughs as they lightly flutter up the stairs towards their booth. And whilst her small, round ears are suddenly logged with water, the laughter somehow manages to pierce through as clear as day.

"Need a hand?" Asta's voice, however, sounds muffled as she holds out a dripping right hand.

Dincey-Lee keeps her eyes on Fiffamay's back; "No thanks, I'm fine." She softly states as she rises to her feet; "Shift starting already?"

"Soon, I just wanted to see-"

"What's his name?" Dincey slightly sighs, then begins scratching a rather itchy spot on her head.

"Oh shush up. What's she doing here anyway? She's not rostered on today at all."

"I can only imagine..." D.L. trails off in thought as Asta scuffs away while shaking her head at her sister's oddness.

"So what's this idea?" Kether-Lou enquires as she carefully loads up the second bubble of the day.

"It looked like an oil painting of a love heart melting over a hot dog in a bun..." Dincey-Lee recalls.

"There are some truly odd ideas in that pond."

## **BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK**

“...And it’s being held by a pug dog.”

“Like I say, odd- locked and loaded.” Kether-Lou taps the trumpet.

“Let’s try this side of the globe for this one- how about... Sydney.”

“Sydney, Australia it is.” Canver-Lee nods. “Let’s try Newtown- there appears to be a healthy university student population around there.”

In the distance, a long, loud, reheat of a horn halts the team, in fact, it stops every single Bubblid in their tracks. A sudden gush of excitement rushes over the entire population as the horn sounds out again three more times.

\*BAROOOO! BAROOOO! BAROOO!\*

“The winds are nigh!” A one-time-successful Bubblid named Brinda-May shouts with glee as she springs out of her neighbouring booth to a thunderous symphony clomps by excited wooden feet.

## **chapter three**

### **BUBBLID IN THE WIND**

**F**orgoing their newly-loaded bubble, and the already-lit screens which now feature the lounge-room of a student share house, Dincey-Lee leads her team up to the highest level for a treat: the chance to watch the Guardian land, and the ceremony's first arrivals, even if from a distance.

“But only those two. We've got work to do.” She declares as they reach the final tier of the sloping workhouse; “I'm hoping for a win today.”

They venture along the corridor, past endless empty booths, with each one of the six teammates silently hoping that no other team has learned of their secret spot in the past twelve months. Over by the waterfall, eight sets of wombat-skin drums begin being pounded with a traditional ceremonious rhythm, joined by several different horns and whistles that had been fashioned out the gorge's varied flora- plus a few animal bones.

“Empty.” Asta breathes out with a ripple of relief as she reaches their observation spot first.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

One by one, the team lines up against the railing, with the shortest, Dincey-Lee, leaning against the canopy wall.

“He’s here.” Humbo unenthusiastically alerts them while pointing above the bubble-filled lake.

A large, brown wedge-tailed eagle swoops overhead silently, barely metres from the ground. Circling around the gorge several times, and sending a cool breeze across the Bubblids, the magnificent bird- known as the Guardian, finally comes to a rest at the foot of the waterfall, where an unseen Bathenda Fink would undoubtedly be waiting for him.

At the top of the fall, orange and brown dust begins to swirl around; the trees sway violently in the gust of annual winds.

But something seems off, at least to Dincey-Lee, who takes a step backwards.

“Wait a minute...” She whispers.

A loud, rapid, whooshing sound drowns out the orchestra.

“Oh, bonkers!” Asta seems to have the same realisation as her sister-made.

“What do you mean?” Mora-Lou shoots Asta a blank look.

“RUN.” Humbo-Bob shouts the second a great, big, shiny helicopter appears above the cliff.

But nobody runs. Not a single one of the team, nor any of the two-thousand-or-so Bubblids that have gathered around the waterfall’s pond move. Heck, not even any of the disillusioned have moved so much as a wooden finger.

I mean, how could they? A human has never breached their home, never in four thousand years.



## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

The helicopter blades begin to slow once the vehicle settles down roughly with a rock-loosening landing. Without waiting for the rotors to come to a complete stop, two humans exit the vehicle, looking out at the gorge below. One of them, a bearded man in a blue, button-up shirt and long, khaki cargo pants, lifts up a large, black camera dangling around his neck, while a woman- the pilot, takes a seat on a rock next to him. He points his lens across to the top of the waterfall, and then down to the lake below.

“Can they see us?” Mora-Lou asks with a dry, croaky voice.

“They will only see dandelions.” Humbo-Bob responds, his mouth acutely agape in semi-shock.

Suddenly, the Guardian rises up, letting a long, shrill war-cry out in the process.

“Uh oh.” Dincey-Lee looks, well- poker-faced.

Without another warning, the eagle swoops over the two humans, his talons freshly sharpened. The people duck down, covering their heads with their hands. The woman screams, her sunglasses fly off her face and into the gorge below.

A loud buzzing fills the air, signalling the arrival of the bees; whose network of hives lies within the caves of the southern cliffs.

“The bees will get them.” Kether-Lou wants to look smug, however, is simply unable to.

But the bees do not attack. Instead, the humans leap into the helicopter before they’re met with the barbed stingers of the Bubblid protectors. The rotors are turned on as soon as the pilot’s door is slammed shut, The Guardian swoops at the glass, almost being sliced by the speeding-up blades in the process. The vehicle lifts off the ground. To Dincey’s right, three adult

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

kangaroos and a joey leap over the canopy, landing with a tsunamic splash as they bounce towards the waterfall. In avoiding the eagle and the bees, the pilot swoops the helicopter down into the gorge.

“OUR BUBBLE.” Dincey-Lee suddenly remembers their work-in-progress; “THE SCREENS ARE ON!”

“QUICK!” Asta turns on her heels, racing towards their work station faster than anybody else on the team. Passing booth, after booth, after booth, the loud, rickety sounds of obvious-warfare happening in mid-air causes the canopy to constantly creak and moan under the pressure of the heavy wind. They reach their aisle, and race down the stairs, unaware of the helicopter’s whereabouts, but able to hear the struggle.

“WE’RE FLOODED!” Asta calls out the moment she splash-lands in booth two-six-one-zero-C.

Dincey-Lee and the remaining four soon arrive, with the leader instantly scrambling towards the trumpet; albeit, the sudden gushing winds of the nearing helicopter, coupled with the knee-deep water flooding their booth cause the short distance to feel twice as long and arduous.

“Don’t worry about it- let’s get to safety.” Humbo-Bob calls out, unwilling to risk his life for one idea.

“We have to!” Dincey shouts; “We’ve left the portal open! Shut it down, Canver!”

“I can’t! Nothing’s working.” Canver-Lee smashes every button as hard as he can, but nothing changes.

“It’s the winds.” Kether-Lou calls out over the thunderous noise above; the chopper causing the canopy to constantly creak and concave.

“Keep trying- Asta, help me?” Dincey motions to the bubble, which sits lodged in the wide-end of the trumpet, struggling to break free.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“We’re water-logged, the nugget will be fried!” Yet again Humbo-Bob tries to talk sense into his leader.

Dincey wraps her damp hands around the idea, and presses her chest against it; feeling the dry wood stick to the transparent surface. \*POP!\* the bubble slips out of the machine, instantly rising in the air and taking Dincey-Lee with it. Her hands slip, but her body sticks; the five Bubblids below all leap for her as she hovers above the booth.

“Try the control panel!” Dincey-Lee suggests; worry strangely seeping through her every grain.

“Nothing’s working!” Kether-Lou loudly puts the lame in ‘laments’.

Mora manages to spring up and snag Dincey’s foot. Digging her heels into the now-muddied floor as she tenses her back, her arms struggle to pull D.L. in closer, but she almost snaps a limb in trying. Humbo-Bob appears beside her and grabs Dincey-Lee’s left foot, pulling twice as hard, successfully; the leader bringing the bubble idea with her.

“Almost there.” Humbo reassures her; “You should have just- whoa!” A gust of wind throws him backwards, taking Mora with him; both landing with a weak splash.

Asta’s hand reaches for Dincey’s leg but misses, her palm hits the bubble instead. The sphere idea flies backwards, taking both sisters with it, until Asta breaks free and face plants the ground. The bubble, however, lets out a loud, obnoxious noise that one might have to excuse themselves for making whilst in polite company. It rises up in the air, allowing Dincey the chance to spot the Helicopter escape over the gorge wall, before quickly descending as if it were a balloon that somebody had blown up, then released. Dincey-Lee somehow musters

## **BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK**

the ability to scream in fear, whilst her teammates watch-on helplessly.

The bubble loops around itself three times, then hits the flood waters of the booth, bounces up in the air, wobbles momentarily on the spot as if were deciding where-to next, before finally swan-diving directly into the square screen with pin-point precision.

Asta, Humbo, Canver, Mora, and Kether-Lou stand frozen, ostensibly horrified; although the bland look on their faces may suggest otherwise to the uninitiated.

But before anybody can say anything, before the sound of the escaping helicopter has faded off into the distance, even before any single one of the tiny, wooden, dandelion-headed creatures can fully comprehend the damage which has been caused, a thin pillar of smoke rises out of Dincey's control desk. A small strand of black smoke which soon turns into a wide one, before eventually: \*KRA-BOOSH!\* At least a dozen pieces of wood fly across the booth, along with the Bubblids; the screens now showing nothing but burnt, dry leaves.

"DINCEY!?" Asta whimpers as she passes out on top of an unconscious Kether-Lou.

## chapter four

### SYDNEY BUBBLE HOUSE

**I**f you had even the slightest idea what sort of day young Noni Mundine has had today, then you would know there is only really one option for her: tell her room-mates *every* single detail.

Starting with an early morning wake-up call from her clearly-inebriated ex-boyfriend, to a close call with a garbage truck, with a detour past the pigeon that dropped a splashy surprise on her forehead, through to her near-dental accident at lunch while she was flirting one-sided with “some hottie in a suit”, the twenty-year-old student doesn’t miss a single beat as she enthralled her housemates with her tragic tale of job hunting through Sydney’s CDB.

“Oh, before I forget- he called *me* today too.” A blonde girl of around twenty-two interrupts the *terribly* thrilling tale.

“ARGH! He just won’t leave me alone. Next time tell him you’ll call the cops.” Noni frowns.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“I already did.” Her best friend looks proud in herself.

“Ha! Good. What did he say?” The third girl, a black-haired twenty-year-old from Japan, asks.

“He kept whining ‘*Daiina, get her to call me, pleeeeeease, I love her, Daina! Daina! Daaaiinnnnaaa!*’ then called me a dog and hung up. Ergh, I’ve never hated my name more.”

“Hilarious!” The Japanese girl, Kozue, snorts with laughter; almost spilling her mug of wine into her half-melted bowl of lemon sorbet in the process.

“Maybe for you!” The blonde pushes her; the wine mug spillleth over.

“HEY!” Kozue cautiously scoops up a spoonful of wine-soaked sorbet. “Yum... Oh, ew, no. GROSS!” She regrettably swallows her mouthful.

All three girls roll backwards, screaming with laughter; Noni wiping away her terrible day along with her joyous tears as the giggles slowly subside.

“Yet he wonders why I dumped him.” The Mundine girl stands up with her empty bowl; laughter still bubbling underneath the surface.

“He mentioned her, said it *wasn’t* cheating.” Daina finishes her bowl, then hands it to Noni, who checks Kozue’s half-full bowl.

“Oh geez, nah, not at all.” She rolls her eyes and breathes out a deep, cleansing sigh, and tilts her head back in the process. “Men, they’re just so-” She stops mid-sentence as her eyes adjust to the light, spotting a black shadow on the back of the frosted-glass light fixture. “SPIIIIDDERRRR!” Her shrill squeals send instant chills down her roommates’ spines.

“YUCK, NOPE, NO WAY, I’M OUT! SEE YA, LOSERS!” Daina sprints for the door as Noni and Kozue

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

both leap for the couch. \*BOOMF!\* Daina's door is sealed shut, undoubtedly with super-strong super-glue, welded steel, and an intricate alarm system of some sort. Complete with tiny lasers. That's what I do.

Equally terrified, Kozue removes her slipper, wielding it above her head as a makeshift insect swatter.

"Why is it always *me* spotting them?!" Noni whines loudly. "RODDY!" She calls towards the hallway; from down which loud, thumping music can be heard.

"RODRIGO!" Kozue screams to no response; "Go get him- I'll keep my eyes on the spider." She waves the slipper in the air.

"No, *you* get him- I'll keep *my* eyes on the spider." Noni taxes the footwear out of her friend's fingers.

"It's my slipper!" Kozue snatches the navy blue slipper back.

"It almost attacked me!" Noni steals the shoe again.

"I'll attack you next!" The slipper changes hands again, but not for long...

"Gimme that!" The Mundine girl pries the fluffy pantofle back. A struggle ensues. Noni's foot slips off the couch. She yelps. Kozue manages to gain control of the slipper. She drop down onto her behind; the wooden slats in their cheap couch hurt, but she refuses to react.

"OVER MY DEAD BODY!" She slips the shoe underneath her now-sore bottom.

"GOOD, THE SPIDER WILL EA- HEY! Not fair!"

"Just get him, *please?*"

"Fine." Noni keeps her eyes firmly on the shadowed spider as she arches around the living room, then backs slowly down the hallway.

Sensing it's safe, she turns around, and races towards the last door on the left. \*THOMP-THOMP-THOMP-THOMP!\* The force of her knocks sends

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

shattering vibrations from her bony knuckles, right down her skinny, medium-brown arm. After a few seconds, the door opens up; the thumping music blasts Noni backwards by an inch- at least.

“...KNOW SHE GOT A CASE OF...” The raspy, raw vocals rip through the opened doorway.

“THERE’S A SPIDER!” Noni tries shouting over the music; “COME KILL IT!”

“WHAT?!” Their sole male roommate shouts back, tilting his ear in a fruitless attempt to hear her.

“WE NEED YOU, THERE’S A SPIDER!” She shouts again.

“WHAT!? I CAN’T HEAR YOU!?”

“THERE’S A SPIIIIDERRR!!!” Her face turns blue as she runs out of breath.

“HANG ON.” He leaves the door ajar as he turns on his heels; Noni tries her hardest not to watch his slightly-baggy jeans from behind. With a soft click, a loud ringing fills the air- or at least in Rodrigo’s ears. For Noni: silence at last.

“FINALLY! There’s a spider- come kill it!” Noni whines, then steps back.

“You three, I swear.” The law student laughs as she exits his bedroom; “I hate them too, y’know?”

“Up on the light in the lounge.”

“Get some fly spray for me?” He asks, she nods.

“No way, we have candles lit- like ten of them.” Kozue interjects from her “safe” spot on the couch.

“Sheesh.” Rodrigo Macheco shakes his head as he enters the lounge room, finding Kozue Nakasashi curled up on the couch.

“FINALLY!” She unfurls from her foetal position.

“Ah, that tiny thing?!” The young man chuckles, amused at yet another non-threat causing such drama.



## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“IT’S NOT TINY!” Both Kozue and Noni cry out in unison, clearly mortified at his suggestion.

“HA. It’s not even a spider!” Roddy doubles over in a wheezing laughter; heavy tears hit his polka-dotted socks, drenching them instantly.

“Wait-what?!” Noni tilts her head in confusion.

“It’s a- it’s a- it’s a- a- dandelion.” He rolls on the floor, unable to control himself.

“Oh-yay!” Kozue claps excitedly.

“A dandelion?!” The Mundine girl can’t believe him.

“Yeah, man.” Rodrigo tosses the flowered-weed stem to the floor at Noni’s feet. “Call me when a crocodile is swimming in the toilet or something just as real.” He giggles at his own sass as he exits; both women watching him as he leaves.

“Now we know what the time is!” Kozue leans forward, scoops up the floppy flower, then passes it to Noni; “Here, you do it- for the good luck.”

“One o’clock.” She blows at the weed, most of the seed heads float away under the force. “Two o’clock.” She blows again, leaving at least four seed heads. “THREE O’CLOCK!” She blows as hard as she can, finally removing the remaining heads.

“NO!” Asta states as loudly as she can. “NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!” She feels mortified but stares blankly at the cracked screen.

“SHE’S DEAD!” Mora-Lou blandly shouts.

“THEY’VE KILLED HER!” The personality-filled Edilo-Bob shrieks as his damp fingers clench onto the remaining stems in the balding Bubblid’s head. Behind him, several well-developed Bubblids- all friends of Dincey-Lee, pace back and forth in panic.

“NO. NO. NO.” Asta half-heartedly slams her palms into the damaged control desk, a shard of dried leaf falls

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

off the broken round screen. The moment the piece of screen hits the desk, it shrivels up into a ball on its own accord as if it were suddenly self-conscious, or a page of brainstorming which a young author may have deemed unworthy to use.

“Please be careful, I’m still trying to-” Humbo-Bob calls out with half of his body underneath the organ-toaster desk, a box of strange wooden tools sits next to his feet.

“DO SOMETHING.” Dincey’s sister dryly demands; “She can’t be dead, not Dincey-Lee.”

“I will, I mean- I’m trying to, I promise.” The mystic-mechanic pokes his head out. “Try sending an impulse now.”

“SHE’S DEAD! SHE’S DEAD!” A tall Bubblid with a large, round head, and broad, bubbled shoulders cries out as she leaps out of the room, screaming down the quiet, empty aisles.

“Shepherding a cool breeze in through the open window in five... four... three...” Canver-Lee silently mouths the final two numbers in his countdown.

Asta, Edilo-Bob, Kether-Lou, Mora, Canver, and at least a dozen other Bubblids all stare at the only remaining screen; with only Edilo’s face showing any signs of hope- anybody else who is able to express their emotions can only feel heartache or shock. But nothing happens. And yet, they continue staring. Nobody moving a wooden muscle, not so much as a splinter.

“Is any-” Humbo enquires from underneath, but is instantly interrupted by the entire group.

“SHHHHH!” Kether-Lou hushes her workmate.

“Nothing.” Asta’s eyes turn over slightly. She feels something inside, but isn’t sure what; even if she is well aware of what heartache is.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“Did you try replacing the nugget?” Edilo bends down in a squat.

“First thing we did- the last one was fried.” The unseen Humbo replies. “It’s over by the tripod.”

“Then I am out of ideas- you need Bathenda’s help.”

“GREAT.” Dincey’s team all respond in unison.

“LOOK!” Brinda-May points over Mora’s shoulder towards the square screen, on which Dincey-Lee’s dormant body is being moved towards the kitchen.

“They’re going to give her water.” Mora suggests.

“Of course, humans love flowers, they’ll put her in a vase.” Edilo places his stubby, wet fingers onto Asta’s shoulder as a sign of reassurance that everything will be fine. But as every single pair of Bubblid eyes focuses in on their lost friend, Asta sudden feels cold, almost lost as she realizes that just might not be the case.

“Just chucking it in the bin!” Noni Mundine calls back to her roommates as her elbow hits the kitchen light switch. The fluorescent globe flickers on, drowning the brown-and-cream room in a cold, sterile almost-bluish light. Her foot hits the pedal on their small kitchen bin causing the lid to flip open. Noni scrunches up her nose at the rotten smell emanating from the near-full trash can. The dandelion stem rolls off her hands, landing on a soft, cold, squishy bed of discarded microwave spaghetti before the pedal is released; therefore causing the lid to fall.

“Bring the bottle back with you!” Daina calls out from the other room.

Noni brushes her hands together, then reaches for the fridge door. She yanks it open, and stands there surveying their hoard for a moment. And somehow, as if the frosty air had leapt out of the refrigerator, and through the square screen, every single Bubblid

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

watching stands there frozen on the spot- unable to move, sure, but absolutely chilled to the bone as the screen turns black, permanently.

Racing towards the kangaroos, Bathenda Fink's long legs leap over rubble and rocks with ease as if she were carried by the winds. Every Bubblid she passes- whether preoccupied or not, stops to marvel at the grace of their anointed one; bowing their heads in respect. None of them could ever imagine the sort of stress she must be under currently. And yet, the leader shows no sign of strain, no sign of panic, and certainly no sign of the lost, confused feeling pulsating through her perfectly proportioned body. In her nineteen ceremonies of existence, never has a human breached their fortress. Memories of a rather vicious storm in her third year flood her mind, only to be washed away by the great fire of her tenth year. The fire having been started by a bolt of lightning on the eastern ridge; only to spread to the unprepared Bubblids below. And yet, that memory is burnt away by the constant headache caused by the incessant nagging of her sister-made; whose best friend disappeared mysteriously one morning before sunrise.

And whilst many leaders may have cracked under such pressure, and certainly every single one of them would have turned to an assistant, or a deputy, perhaps even a close friend or confidant to help them through such stressful circumstances, Bathenda Fink has been bereft of that benefit since birth.

“Help! Bathenda!” A boring voice calls out from somewhere on her left; “MY HOME! BATHENDA!”

With a towering boulder in her path, and unable to slow down quickly from having gained too much speed, she leaps towards the rock; her foot out in front. Her

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

knee bends as her foot twists around while her body is in mid-air, it twists around with her foot; therefore changing her direction without losing momentum. She hits the ground running, heading up a grassy hill towards an old, retired Bubblid standing outside a collapsed beehive.

“Was anybody injured?” The leaping leader skids to a halt in front of the man; whose eyes are red-rimmed.

“I broke a finger.” He holds up his left hand; “It doesn’t hurt anymore, but I lost everything!” He twists around, tears immediately begin pouring down his chubby cheeks.

“We will help you rebuild, Addakip, you can be sure of that.” She places her permanently damp palm on his shoulder, squeezing gently. He lifts a fat, frail old hand onto hers, causing the permanently dry back of her hand to temporarily dampen at his touch.

“I will send Fiffamay over to help you move into a new home- but I must get to Mr. Red- he called for me.”

Somehow forgetting his own pain, Addakip’s face lights up with shock; “Please, go- help him! How awfully selfish of me!”

“Never selfish.” Bathenda wields a warm, empathetic smile before taking several steps backwards, twisting around, and leaping back into a speedy run; “Mrs. Blue is about to give birth!”

Making her way around the boulder, and down the sloping path that leads to the border, she reaches the mouth of King Kangaroo Cave quicker than you can say King Kangaroo Cave. Her eyes unwittingly close before she enters, deep down afraid of what may lie ahead, and so steps into the cave with them still tightly shut.

“BATHENDA!” An unfamiliar (to her) male voice calls out from behind her.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

She whips around, her eyes shoot open; instantly stinging in the bright sunlight. Blinded by the light, she can't see the approaching Bubblids, but she can hear their crunching footsteps as they close in.

"Bathenda! My name is Kether-Lou, I work in booth-"

"I can assure you both that hundreds of control desks were broken, I have experienced Bubs assessing the situation as we speak." Bathenda calmly quells their concerns.

"No- that's not it! We-we-we lost-" Humbo tries to explain.

"Our leader- Dincey-Lee, she's gone!" Kether interrupts to finish her struggling friend's sentence.

"Yes, sadly we lost fifteen Bubblid, crushed by debris under the winds."

"Oh, that's awful." Humbo gently gasps.

"You don't understand." Kether panics with a poker face; "We didn't-"

"I promise you both, I am well aware of the situation- but I must attend to Mrs. Blue."

"Mrs. Blue?!"

"Yes- Mr. Green is in a right state." Bathenda turns around to leave, but somehow, mustered and forged from the tiniest chip in the thinnest grain within her shoulder, Kether-Lou finds a streak of sass exploding from deep inside...

**"AND MY FRIEND IS STUCK IN SYDNEY, LADY!"**

Bathenda stops in her tracks; illuminated by the sunlight against the dark backdrop of King Kangaroo Cave. She whips around, her eyes filled with fear.

"How did this happen?!"

"Sucked into the screen by the helicopter."

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“BONKERS!” Bathenda leaps on the spot. She attempts to rush off to the left, but a sudden thought stops her. She twists to the right and takes a single step-but doesn’t move. She motions backwards, then forwards, upwards, and down. She looks blank, as if her entire personality had faded away whilst she stands in the sun’s rays.

“What do we do?!” Kether-Lou firmly asks. “How do we get her back?!”

“I have not the faintest idea.” Bathenda’s own words render the Fink leader, as well as both Humbo-Bob and Kether-Lou, speechless.

She blinks, but it’s pointless. She wants to cry for help, but she’s tongue-tied. She breathes in, but it’s awful; the smell unlike anything she’s endured before- and she lives downwind of wild animals. She listens to the muffled talking- only laughter pierces through the thick plastic with any sort of clarity. She wants to move, but doesn’t want to risk being caught. She knows they won’t see her- the real her- but that’s beside the point. And so she lies in the darkness, in a bed of food scraps, biding her time. And it is fairly safe to say, if ever there was a time that young Dincey-Lee was totally thankful to be drab, boring, and completely lacking in emotion, it is in this very moment.

And so, she waits.

The seconds tick on slowly, the minutes slower than that. The hours? Well, they’re just painful as they crawl past. Not that Dincey-Lee can know, all she can see is darkness, and the faint images of her imagination. The same kind of faint images which she syphoned into her tubs in order to create her bubbles.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“MY BUBBLES.” Whilst talking normally, her voice amplifies and echoes against the ceiling made of bin lid; “I COMPLETELY FORGOT ABOUT THEM.”

She vaguely pictures them growing bigger and bigger within their tubs. Wider and wider, the imagined ideas expand beyond the capacity of their wooden baths. POP! POP! POP! One by one the bubbles burst, sending chunks of colour flying across Dincey-Lee’s imagination. She tenses up with a dash of hope, suddenly feeling more determined to return home than she has done in the two days since she was swept through the screen and into the lounge room of the most intriguing, most hilarious, most talented artist she’s ever seen, and she’s seen *many* on her screen in the past eight years of her purpose-filled existence.

Meanwhile, roughly two-thousand-klicks away, Asta stands in the same spot, staring at the same blank, broken canvas, while the same Bubblids busily bustle around behind her. A damp hand slides over her shoulder, not that she notices.

“How about you get some rest, Bub?” Humbo-Bob appears beside her; “We’ll let you know once it’s up and running.”

“Why don’t you use ours until then?” Brinda-May suggests as she passes a long, wooden, J-shaped tool to a Bubblid wrapped in a brown, leafy uniform. “Do you remember the coordinates?”

Without a word, Asta and Canver leap over a large crate filled with tools, and straight into the booth next door; whose control desk sits undamaged and dormant.

“Why didn’t you think of that before?” Kether quite-coldly glares at Brinda.

“Because I didn’t.” Their neighbouring Bubblid responds with a shrug as she follows after Asta.



## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

Taking merely seconds to fire-up, all three Bubblids stand in disappointment at the pitch-black image that appears before them.

“It’s broken, Brinda!” Asta loudly complains.

“It should work- try somewhere else.”

“I’m not moving away from Dince.”

“It’s working, I tried it before.” The team leader of two-six-one-one-C states.

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“Wait, you two-” But Canver is interrupted.

“Try moving around.”

“I am, it’s just pitch black.”

“Bubs, hold up a sec-” He tries again.

“It’s not broken.”

“Looks like it.” Asta starts to lose faith in her work-neighbour.

“STOP IT. LOOK, THERE, RIGHT THERE!” Canver loudly, yet dully, catches their attention. He points to a strand of grey on the screen; “It’s night time already.”

“It is?” Asta looks out over at the lake, spotting the vibrant sunset reflected on the still waters. “Did the bell ring?”

“Yes.” Both Brinda and Canver inform her in perfect unison.

“Where was I?!” Asta asks.

“Look- something’s happening!” Brinda-May lights up with joy.

Asta leans into the desk, squinting her large eyes to focus in on a new strand of light bouncing up and down at the bottom left of the screen.

“AGAIN!” Dincey-Lee pushes her fists and feet up into the darkness, feeling the heavy lid rise up- then instantly fall back down again; “I can do it!” She informs

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

herself; “Just gotta... HEEEE-YUGH!” The lid levers up. In the faint, blue moonlight, she watches it reach its peak. Her eyes light up in hope. With great difficulty, she struggles to her feet as the bin lid teeters back and forth. Finally standing upright, it feels like a pathway of quicksand as she attempts to move towards the edge. The struggle is real- and gross. A loud creak above her head catches her off-guard. She looks up, just in time to see the white, plastic lid lose its balance and fall down on top of her. She leaps for the edge of the bin, her head hits the side; “Ouch.” She calmly complains; “At least I’m out of *that* mess.” She lays back on what is clearly paper; “One more, almost there...” In the darkness, her hand scraps over something wooden. She feels it up and down- finding it to be rather flat, but long. She pulls it closer towards her, thankfully it seems to be around the same length as she is. A thought crosses her mind, well, a memory. A memory of watching an elderly couple on her screen as her and her Bubblids tried to gift them with the idea to write a memoir about their fifty-year marriage. They stood on the street, their car having over-heated. A long, thin, metal stick holding the bonnet of the car up. A long, thin metal stick which Canver-Lee accidentally hit with a small burst of wind. Small, yet strong enough to have knocked said metal stick, sending the bonnet flying down onto the man’s mobile phone, leaving them stranded at dusk in the middle of winter. With this memory playing on repeat, she wedges the bottom of the wooden stick into the soft, squishy area, and presses down gently. She feels- and hears, the piece of wood sink into the spaghetti, before seeming to reach something hard underneath. Using the solid-bottom, she levers the wood up, which in turn causes the bin lid to open- and stay that way.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

The young Bubblid slips out of the thin opening in the lid, leaving streaks of tomato sauce down the lemon-scented bin-liner. She hits the linoleum with a clanking splotch. The tiny sound barely echoes across the large room, but she stays frozen on her back, as still as a twig, listening for sounds of any approaching humans. Sensing it's safe, she rolls over onto her knees, and lifts herself up by pushing her dry knuckles into the ground. Feeling nothing short of filthy, she sneaks across the kitchen, keeping out of the strands of moonlight pouring in through the window behind the sink. Reaching the rubbery mat, she leaps in the air, landing in the tiny bowl of water with nary a splash. She rolls around several times, washing the cold tomato sauce away. Through water-logged ears, she hears thumps in the ground. Suddenly freezing up again, her eyes light up with delight as a giant, shadowy hairy snout lowers into view. The thick, wiry whiskers tickle her face as the dog opens its jaws; letting its long, pink tongue unfurl into the water. After several lap-ups of water, the tongue slides under Dincey-Lee, and wraps around her. Pulling her out of the water bowl. Pressed against the blue heeler's lips, it tickles her beyond any sensation she's ever felt. The three-year-old puppy leaps with excitement into the lounge room, letting the lost Bubblid fall out into the carpet.

"Silly boy!" Dincey-Lee lightly chuckles as she rises to her feet; "I've just gotten all cleaned up! Atta boy!" She rubs her stumpy hands into the dog's cheeks with affection; "Bed time? Bed time, boy?" The dog seems to understand; it leaps around in circles multiple times with its tail wagging wildly- almost hitting Dincey-Lee every time. Eventually coming to a (regrettable) stop, the puppy lowers down its front half, allowing Dincey-Lee to

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

place her foot in its red collar, and heave herself up. With one leg either side of the horse's dog's neck, she grabs hold of the collar and gently tugs. Instantly, the dog rears up on its hind legs, and races out of the lounge room, down the hallway, and through the only door which remains open.

The moment the pair enter the dim room, lit by a laptop screensaver of a ball bouncing around randomly, Dincey-Lee slips off the puppy. Whilst the dog leaps up onto the bed- squeezing its way into Noni Mundine's arms, Dincey-Lee sneaks across the furry, blue carpet to curl up against a plush kangaroo which lies on its side under the bed; drifting off to sleep the moment her eyelids close.

\*BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEEEEP!\* the first time it rings, Dincey's eyes shoot open. \*BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEEEEP!\* the second time it rings, Noni Mundine's eyes open. She reaches for her smart phone, reading the name of the caller though blurred, crusty eyes. She barely makes out the name 'Justin'. She groans, then rolls over. \*BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEEEEP!\*

"GO AWAY!" She yells at the phone. She swings her arm behind her, knocking the Nokia onto the carpet, inches from Dincey-Lee.

The Bubblid stares at it. The large, rectangular screen flashes rhythmically as it \*BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEEEEP!\* rings. Noni's hand reaches down, Dincey takes a step backwards. With her index finger, the human aims for the 'reject call' button. It hits the 'answer' option instead.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“Baby, thank god you picked up... Look, I’m sorry.” The sad, sorry voice blares out of the phone; “Hello? Babe? Hello? Come on, don’t do this to me?!”

“GO AWAY!” Noni growls from above.

“Babe? C’mon, suga-”

Without realizing what she’s doing, Dincey-Lee’s foot shoots out in front, hitting a red circle on the screen; therefore hanging up the call.

“Oops.” She whispers wryly to herself; deep down rather pleased with her actions.

“ARGHHH, ALRIGHT!” Noni moans as her legs appear, her feet hitting the ground in angst; “Fine, I’m awake- stupid phone.” She kicks the smart phone towards her shoes, which sit neatly under an easel. The same easel she has sat impatiently in front of time and time again over the past two days- at least.

Dincey-Lee watches from under the bed as the human slips into her over-sized, pink dressing gown, and exits the room with yet another whiny growl about being awake too soon.

At eleven o’clock- so says the news on the blaring television in the lounge room, Noni Mundine re-enters her bedroom, filled-up and freshly showered. She pulls her desk chair over to her easel, and falls into it as if she were a rag doll. Unopened paints sit at her feet, but she fails to reach for them. Five paintbrushes sit in a paint-blotched container that hangs at its front, unused since before graduation. A clean, pure white canvas sits on the lower member, while twelve more unopened ones lean against the easel’s front legs. Twenty-thousand dollars on a university degree, and this is where it’s gotten her. She feels stupid. Talentless. Her arms lamely

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

fall to the side as if they themselves had run out of steam- or ideas. She breathes out heavily.

Under the bed, Dincey-Lee watches on. The same scene she's witnessed since she was swept into Sydney. And if it wasn't for the many pieces of artwork that cover the twenty-one-year-old's bedroom walls, Dincey-Lee would have no idea that Noni was even an artist- let alone a talented one. The Bubblid wants to feel the girl's pain, but she simply can't. She can only understand the situation for what it is. A circumstance she has witnessed many times, and one that no artist wants to find themselves in- whether visual, literary, musical or otherwise.

And yet, without a choice... well, without any more money to travel around looking for a job again this week, the Mundine girl stays slouched in her seat, despite the ever-rising pain in her spine.

\*BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEEEEP!\* the phone startles her, but she makes no effort to rush for it. \*BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BE!\*

"Oh, hey Mum." She suddenly sounds alive; "Yeah, yeah, everything's fine. How's you mob? How's dad? Good, good. Nah, just trying to think of something to paint. Yeah, nah, already done a hundred variations at school. I dunno- maybe I'll go for a walk or something, might inspire me... Oh yeah, he keeps calling, even called Daina. I know, I know... Don't worry, I won't... OK then, love ya- bye." She drops the phone at her feet, then sighs out loudly. "I hate this." She stands, and stretches, then falls back into her seat again. Turning her head, she looks out the window. A pair of magpies are sitting on the fence line, happily yapping to each other about their day. She smiles, feeling a small spark of inspiration rise up in her chest. She pictures her

## **BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK**

twelve-year-old self, riding her bright orange bike down the street; her unprotected head ducking down every few seconds to avoid one of many magpies she's had to endure in her lifetime. She remembers her white, starry helmet swinging madly as she races along the footpath; the bird's beak hitting her at least three times. It hurt. That memory wipes away the smile, but not the spark of inspiration...

...She picks up a paint brush, then reaches for the black paint...

## **chapter five**

### **LIVE TOGETHER, BUBBLE ALONE**

**N**oni Mundine's right hand twirls the paintbrush in the black paint four time, then wipes it on the side of the container. She lifts her arm, hovering the wet tip in front of the canvas. Trying to picture her angle- the shadows- the tone of her picture. She takes a deep breath in.

\*KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK!\* the door creaks open without her answering. Daina, her blonde medical-student best friend, sticks her head into the room.

"We're ordering pizza for lunch, do-"

"Uh, yeah, dude." Without hesitation, Noni places the paintbrush into the paint container, then carefully places them both on her desk as she exits the room, ordering; "Large supreme with chicken and barbeque sauce."

Dincey-Lee has no idea what that may be, but can't help but think it sounds delicious. The abandoned Bubblid stares up at the blank canvas. A hundred-and-one images pop in and out of her imagination. Picturing all sorts of possibilities that the human could paint on there.

"How can I help her?!" She ponders out-loud to the stuffed kangaroo toy. It stares back at her silently



## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

through small, black, plastic eyes; “I don’t suppose you have any ideas on you, do you?”

It stares back at her.

Sadly, for Noni Mundine- and Dincey-Lee, another two days pass of sitting mindlessly in front of the canvas; the magpie inspiration having long dissipated. With several interruptions via phone and roommate, the normally-sociable woman found herself doing the unthinkable, and switching off her mobile phone after returning from her pizza lunch, only to leave it off for the unforeseeable future.

She sits. Continuously. Moving positions every hour-or-so, if only to stop her back and neck from hurting. Several times she stands, jogging or dancing on the spot. At least twice she runs around her room, high-fiving every poster and photo that hangs on her light-green walls, for no other reason than boredom coupled with the kookiness that comes with conceiving creative commodities.

And all the while, Dincey-Lee watches on in deep admiration; silently egging the human on as if she were a high-school cheerleader.

Another day passes, and not even so much as a speck of paint appears on the canvas. And still, the human sits. As restless as uninspired as ever; knowing in her heart that she won’t ever survive in the real world. A knock at the door startles her, Daina again.

“We’re going down Bondi- wanna come?”

“Nah, I gotta get something out for my portfolio.”

“Still blank?”

“Still blank.”

“Why donchya bring some of ya old spares down-try’n sell ‘em?”

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“Nah.”

“Aw come on, you could use the money.”

“Yeah, but... *who's* going?”

“Just us three- Roddy's driving.”

“Is that all?”

“And Micah.”

“Erk, he's always drooling over me.”

“There ya go, one guaranteed sale at least. You've already priced 'em- just do it, loser.” And with that, Daina Masterlin slams the door shut.

“*FIIIIINNNE!*” Noni whines as she stands and heads towards her bed.

Stubble-haired Dincey-Lee squishes herself between the kangaroo's legs as a long, tattooed arm reaches under the bed and feels around. It takes several pats of blank carpet before the fingertips tap a plastic folio. They latch onto the thick, black handle and pull the large portfolio out from under the bed; bringing the kangaroo- and Dincey-Lee, with it.

“Hoppy Go Lachy!” Noni cries in delight as she spots her childhood toy.

She picks it up, leaving Dincey-Lee exposed, but thankfully unnoticed. After squeezing the teddy-roo tightly for good-luck, the human throws it onto her pillow, then swipes up the art folder, before swiftly swiping up her beach bag and exiting the room; leaving the door slightly ajar and her switched-off phone on her bedsit.

Dincey-Lee lies on her back, staring up at the dozens of photos that cover the ceiling. She ponders what the girl's life must be like outside of the house; specifically: who all the other people are. In most photos, Noni seems to have her widely-smiling face pressed up against somebody else's- the sort of

behaviour you are highly unlikely to see from the Bubblid community. In fact, they don't even have cameras- even if they *were* the ones who planted the ideas in a human's head many ceremonies ago.

Hearing four car doors slam shut outside the bedroom window, Dincey-Lee listens for the familiar rumble of their automobile reversing off the property- signalling her reign of freedom.

Once knowing it's finally safe, Dincey-Lee springs to her feet; eager to explore the rest of the large share-house. Stopping first at Noni's desk, she kicks the metal table-leg several times, instantly being met with an ever-growing thumping.

"Atta, boy!" The Cowbub cries out calmly as she leaps up onto the dog and steers her furry friend out of the room.

Not knowing where to explore first, Dincey decides to delve into Daina's extraordinarily messy bedroom. Finding dozens of empty food, dirty laundry, and a hundred red-wine stains decorating the carpet, D.L. finds herself backing away slowly out of the young woman's room before the temptation to clean takes over- and the dog's temptation to sniff-out every empty packet consumes the beast.

Venturing next towards Kozue's room, the Bubblid blandly drops her shoulders in disappointment to find the door tightly shut.

Steering the puppy towards Roddy's room- having already spotted the door left ajar, Dincey-Lee finds herself pulling on the collar to signal the dog to stop.

"Should we, boy? Do we dare go in there?" But the puppy answers for her, and leaps into the darkened, dusty, dreadfully-smelling bedroom. "Bonkers." Dincey-

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

Lee refrains from dropping her jaws as she enters the young man's room.

The Bubblid vaguely recognizes much of the car-branded and soccer team paraphernalia that adorns the walls, but finds herself questioning who all the pretty women in swimsuits are.

"He must have a lot of sisters." She nods to the dog, who responds with a hearty \*RUFF!\* before dropping to the floor; which surprisingly seems to be the cleanest carpet across the whole house.

Climbing up onto Rodrigo's bed, Dincey-Lee instantly does her favourite thing to do on Noni's bed. She turns around, facing the edge, then falls backwards; letting her body bounce softly on the bedcovers.

She lets out an emotionless sigh, but is cut short by a sudden splintering feeling in her torso.

"...My purpose..." It suddenly hits her, and while the memory of the gorge and her life's work begins to dance around her mind, it doesn't last long. \*RUFF!\* the excited field spaniel joins her up on the bed. Instantly, she turns to him, and gently smiles; "Let's explore."

While the puppy rolls around the bed, Dincey-Lee leaps over to the bedside table, which is covered in a hundred-and-two trinkets and gadgets- just like Noni's is. Only, the boy's trinkets and gadgets seem to differ remarkably from hers. Where Noni Mundine has her phone charger, a glass jar filled with pens, empty pudding cups, a discarded silver necklace with a fancy, twisted 'N' pendant, her diary- which Dincey-Lee has promised herself to avoid, plus at least a dollar in small change, as well as two photos of her family in a hand-painted frame, and a glass figurine of a fairy-tale princess, the boy's interests strike Dincey as much

darker. She stands on a broken CD case overlooking the tabletop mess. Looking down, she almost leaps off the plastic case after finding herself standing on a rather terrifying picture of a human skull being struck by lightning. Leaning against the compact disc case are a pair of scissors and a knife, Dincey-Lee glances at her reflection in the knife as she steps over, walking towards a glassy eyeball with a striking blue iris. It stares blankly at her, unmoving. It unnerves the Bubblid. She waves her damp palm in front of the eye, but nothing happens. She leans in, surveying her reflection in the glassy surface as she inspects the pupil. But still, the eye doesn't move.

Sensing it is safe to do so, she wraps her slippery, wet palms around the eye. It immediately slides out of her grip, but having had her recent experience aboard the rogue bubble, she changes tact immediately and crosses her arms over; lifting the glass ball up with the dry backs of her hands.

“Ohhh, it's a ring!” She plainly realizes out loud, looking over at the curious puppy with a relieved twinkle in her eye. She slips it over her round, wooden head. The metal band wedges in-between the growing stems in her head, fitting snugly while the eyeball looks out ahead; “How do *eye* look?” She wants to laugh at her own joke, but alas, cannot.

Exploring further, Dincey-Lee- complete with eyeball hat, finds a gadget on Rodrigo's desk which she recognizes. Curious to try it out, but unaware of what she's actually doing, the Bubblid leaps over an almost-full ashtray, followed by a fallen bottle of cologne, before springing up onto a white, cylindrical object and landing in front of the familiar machine.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“Hmm, I think they...” She leans forward, pressing the blank screen. But nothing happens. She tries again. But yet again, the screen remains off. She looks around the student’s work desk, finding at least four pens, and one thick pen with a rubbery end. Her eyes light up in the slightest. She picks it up, using the rubbery end on the screen. Success. Without reading through the options, and certainly not the instructions, Dincey-Lee presses the ‘play’ button...

“...YA KILLING ME AND I FEEL YA PAIN!” The angry, yet seductive voice screams through the white cylinder.

\*RUFF-RUFF-RUFF!\* the suddenly-blaring music causes the puppy to freak out and scramble out of the room to safety.

“AND I KEEP IT LOCKED UP!” The lead singer continues to fill the room as Dincey-Lee slides off the desk- by way of a bag-strap, ready to explore the many cupboards and shelves that line the room.

After several hours of exploring some of the most fascinating inventions known to humankind (and Bubblids), Dincey-Lee tenses up in near-fright at the unannounced sound of four car doors slamming, quickly followed by the familiar jingling sound of keys.

“Uh-oh!” She states, spotting the shadows on the frosted glass of the front door. She shoots the puppy a quite-guilty look, then whispers; “Giddy-up!” The Bubblid taps both hands on her knees, the dog instantly gallops across the lounge, allowing Dincey to climb up on his tail, and race out of the room, and straight into Noni’s. Leaping off, Dincey accidentally catches her reflection in the door of a glass cabinet. She tenses up upon spotting the glass eye still on her head. In a state

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

of panic, she throws it off, leaving it discarded under Noni's desk chair, before leaping under the bed to safety, just in time...

"FIFTY BUCKS, PUP!" Noni bursts through her open doorway; "ONE PIDDLY PAINTING! FIFTY BUCKS!" She falls back onto her bed, kicking her feet in extreme excitement, beaten only by the ludicrous level of joy emanating out of the spaniel; whose tail is whipping side-to-side so rapidly that it could very well generate energy; "Glad I went, Stimp- yes I am, boy, yes I am!" She rolls around her bed with the dog wriggling, and wriggling, and jiggling inside of her arms.

Underneath the bed, Dincey-Lee lies back on the laces of an old pair of runners, staring up at the wooden slats of the bed, ready to drift off to sleep from contentment.

That is, until; \*knock-knock-knock!\* both Daina and Kozue stick their heads in the door.

"Oi, loser- you inspired?" Daina asks with a grin.

"Yeah, actually, I am- watch it, Stimp." Noni's feet appear, she plants them on the floor then hops over to her painting easel.

"Good." Daina disappears.

"Can't wait to see it!" Kozue smiles before disappearing and closing the door gently.

"Right..." Noni picks up a paintbrush, yet neglects to pick a colour of paint; "Ummmm..." She changes position; "What about a..." Sadly, nothing appears on the canvas that day.

Nor the next day.

And neither the one after that.

By the weekend, she had barely left her seat at all during the daytime hours- and some of the evenings too;

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

with Dincey-Lee continue to cheer her on through the painfully frustrating experience.

It isn't until the Tuesday morning, with Noni home alone- her roommates at school, and Dincey-Lee sprawled across the puppy's neck- both fast asleep underneath Noni's bed, that the talented Mundine girl finally snaps out of her trance to the loud, obnoxious sound of \*DINNNNNNGG-DONNNNGGG!

The sound lingers long after finishing, only to ring out again as the impatient visitor's finger seems to trip over its own shoelaces and land on the button.

Tying up her dressing gown, Noni takes a deep breath in before opening the door- lest she bite another postman's head off by-accident.

"Babe, please." *Him.*

Instinctively, Noni motions to shut the door, but her ex-boyfriend's foot shoots out, preventing it from closing; "Go away." She grits her teeth and rolls her large, tired, brown eyes.

"Babe, c'mon- you know I love you." He whines.

"Uhk, whatever, dude- go away, I'm busy."

"C'mon, Noni Banoni! You know I wouldn't do that! It was just lies and rumours."

"Don't give me that- just go home."

"C'mon, let's just talk."

"Are you drunk?"

"No."

"Are you?"

"No. I swear- look, babe, I'd do anything for you." He feels her relent her grip on the door, in turn, he moves his foot backwards. His shoulders relax; "It was Stevo and Hazza, they were just messing with me- messing with you to mess me up."



## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“Oh yeah, right. I didn’t hear it from those idiots.”

“No, you heard it from Ulla.”

“Exactly.”

“Who got it from Stevo. I wouldn’t hurt you babe- I love you.” He sounds like he’s about to start crying, but Noni isn’t fooled.

“Go away. We’re finished.”

“Please.”

“No.”

“Can I at least have my dog back?”

“Excuse me?”

“STIMPY!”

Before either party can stop it, the joyous puppy bounds into the lounge room, with an unnoticed Dandelion stem stuck to the back of its neck.

“Leave my puppy alone!” Noni cries out, but it’s no use, her ex-boyfriend overpowers her in strength. He pushes on the door, instantly dropping to his knees.

Stimpy the Spaniel barks in delight at the sight of her owner. No, wait- her jaws snap angrily at his face as she leaps in the air towards him; they clench onto the collar of his shirt. Dincey-Lee not at all emoting the sense of pride she has in herself in this moment as her fingers pull and tug on the collar.

“GEDDIM-OFF!” The cheating boyfriend cries in agony as teeth sink into his shoulder; “STUPID DOG!”

Poor Stimpy whimpers as he’s thrown to the ground. Noni immediately stands in front of her now-shaken puppy for protection.

“Serves you right.” She spits down at him. He stands up, tears and blood covering his face and shirtfront. He looks pathetic, but not as pathetic as he feels.

“You’ve brainwashed him?” He accuses her.

## **BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK**

“Huh?” Her eyes almost cross out of confusion.  
“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I bought him, he’s mine!”

“Actually, I loaned you the money, you never paid me back.”

“You stupid...” But the disgraced ex is silenced by the loud slamming of the door.

But Dincey-Lee, however, sadly misses Noni’s satisfying moment...

The Bubblid leaps off the terrified puppy, sneaking around behind the couch as she follows it.

She hasn’t seen one for days, but here one is.

As bright and shiny as ever.

The tiny sparks inside flashing on and off.

But as Dincey-Lee tries to spring in the air for the mysterious bubble, she almost cries out in joy as three more suddenly float overhead...

## **chapter six**

### **TRAVEL BY BUBBLE**

**N**oni Mundine can't see them, but they're there. They bop and loop around each other, their target following their every move. A gentle breeze is pushed behind the couch, it motions the bubbles towards the kitchen area. Dincey-Lee follows, waving her hands in the air for whomever may be watching; therefore controlling the bubbles.

"Asta, is that you?" The stranded Bubblid whispers to no response. Well, none that she can here.

"Yes, yes, it's us." Asta plainly replies from in front of Brinda-May's screen.

"Two more are sending ideas in, Humbo's going to try to secure some more for you." Mora-Lou informs her temporary leader as she re-enters their now-fixed booth.

"Highly appreciated." Asta turns back to the screen; "Come on, Dince, you've got this..."

Back in Sydney, Dincey-Lee feels almost like one of the many dancers, gymnasts, and/or cheerleaders they have attempted to influence over the years. She pounces for a bubble on minute, then somersaults for another the next. She uses one foot to spring off the dog bowl,

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

narrowly missing a rather lively bubble. Time after time, the ideas slip out of her fingers. All five of them.

“Try sending more? Fill up the room!” She stage-whispers into the air, hoping beyond-anything that somebody hears. Even Fiffamay Fink would do if it means getting her home.

Within minutes, just as she ordered, three more bubbles appear out of thin-air, also unseen by the sulking human in the next room.

\*RUFF!\* Dincey-Lee twists around, spotting Stimpny staring, stunned, at the bubbles. The dog doesn't know whether to bark, bite, or bow down to the brilliant, bouncing, bulbs, so instead shoots Dincey-Lee a look.

A look which may just about forever stick with the stick-built Bubblid.

A look which loudly reads ‘Please don't go’.

“I have to boy, my team needs me!” She walks over to the puppy, gently stroking its whiskers; “I'll take a peek from time to time, see how you're going, okay?” And as if the dog understands, it drops to the floor with a soft, heart-breaking whimper.

Dincey hugs her furry friend around the neck, prompting it to roll on her back, which in turn grants her the privilege of aggressively rubbing the puppy's belly. A sloppy, giant, pink tongue rolls out of the dogs jaws, drenching the dry Bubblid in a going away present. Dincey-Lee feels tugging from within. A tiny nagging feeling that slowly grows into a throbbing splinter within her chest.

“I'll miss you most of all, boy. You be good, and look after Noni for me!” She hugs him again; “I've got something special for her, I promise.”

Spotting three bubbles bopping towards her, Dincey-Lee places one wooden foot on the Dog, keeping

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

one eye firmly on the approaching ideas. In her mind, her tiny head-voice counts down; ‘five, four, three...’

“Walkies, boy?” She mutters the magic word.

The dog flips onto its feet, the force causing Dincey-Lee to catapult high in the air. She twists and spins several times on her way up, before hitting the peak and throwing her arms and legs out as if she were sky-diving. She begins to fall, the air whipping past her face.

\*BOOMF!\* Success! She lands on a large bubble barely millimetres from the kitchen surface.

The bubble instantly stops, it hovers on the spot for a moment before zooming out of the kitchen, “See ya, boy!” Dincey-Lee calls out to the barking dog; who appears more saddened than angry.

The bubble zooms down the hallway towards Noni’s room, but suddenly turns into the bathroom, and rises straight up into the air vent.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Asks Bollabob, whose long dandelion stems surely must be the longest in all of Eido. His leader senses the disinterest in his voice.

“Wherever- whatever gets her home, I guess.”

“Just leave her there, Fiff.”

“My sister would burn me alive.” Fiffamay Fink scoffs regrettably.

“So? It’d be worth it.”

“Take her through those cobwebs there- give her a fright on the way out.” Bollabob suggests with glee.

“There’s a storm approaching.” Jimbo-Bill informs the rest of his team.

“Excellent. This should be fun for us then.” Fiffamay laughs, her team follows suit.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“Bathenda’s coming!” Bollabob suddenly snaps into a stiff, stoic stance as if he were a soldier.

“You’ve caught her, very good- bring her in safely.”

“Of course.”

“*Fiffamay*.” Bathenda glares down at her sister.

“I said I would.”

Bathenda sceptically moves on, with Bollabob watching her disappear down the aisle on behalf of the team.

“She’s gone into Rumma-Lee’s booth.”

“Good.”

The bubble moves rapidly over the streets of Sydney with the returning Bubblid on top; trying to take in every detail she possibly can.

A raindrop hits her on the head. She looks up. Dozens more begin to fall; the dark-grey skies begin to rumble. In the distance, lightning flashes.

“Asta- quick now, the weather’s about to turn bonkers!”

But alas, *Fiffamay* is having too much fun.

As the bubble enters the storm, the Fink leader takes it down, hovering above the road; ensuring to narrowly swerve out of the way of passing cars. The team laughs snidely at the sight of a giant puddle of muddy water washing over the murderous Bubblid; a public bus having driven past at top speed. Only to then laugh heartily as they listen to Dincey-Lee complain about their driving.

“Taking her up, let the lightning do its thing.” *Fiffamay* whispers.

“No, not you.” Asta voice causes the opposing team to tense up momentarily.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“Yes, me. It’s my machine.”

“And it’s my sister.”

“Too bad.”

“What are you doing- get her out of the rain!” Asta reaches for the control panel, but is met with;

“BACK OFF, ASTA!” Fiffamay pushes the visitor into the wall of their booth.

Immediately, driven by anger, fear, and impatience, Asta leaps onto Fiffamay with both hands wrapped around the Fink’s fat neck.

The team watches on, cheering for their leader to “rip her to pieces!” Several other Bubblids from near-by booths stick their head in, many of whom having had successful careers; therefore finding themselves instantly thrilled by this rarest of occurrences.

Dincey-Lee, however, flies this way, that way, up, down, in and out; her bubble having lost control.

She screams, but not in fear, nor in excitement. She bumps into walls, windows, people, cars, trucks, bus stops, and even bounces several times over train tracks before a speeding train rushes past, sending it flying into the harbour waters below.

The transparent sphere floats on the rough waters for several seconds. Enough time for a magnificent lightning bolt to light up the sky. Dincey-Lee’s eyes shoot open, right as the bubble lifts off again, zig-zagging through the heavy rains with the Bubblid on board. Thunder rattles her limbs.

“STOP IT!” Edilo-Bob pleads for the battling Bubblids, Asta and Fiffamay, to no avail.

“Bubs, this is unproductive.” Kether-Lou firmly states, also to be ignored.

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

At least two dozen of the wooden folk watch on, with nobody knowing how to separate the indecipherable pair; who grunt and growl and they tumble around.

“Just let her get her sister-made, boss!” Jimbo-Bill shouts to Fiffamay, only to meet the ire of his team.

“Traitor!” Bollabob draws his attention away from the fight.

“Stick up for that lot, why don’t you?!” The stuck-up Sirra-May sharply snaps.

“You never were one of us, really!” Dibly-Bob’s words hurt Jimbo-Bill more than he allows to show.

“No- it’s just- just-”

“We saw you talking with her!” Hilma-Lou pipes up.

“Yeah- Fiffamay knows.” Sirra-May smiles smugly.

“Leave him alone, you wooden nitwits.” Kether-Lou steps in front of Jimbo, looking as dull and unimposing as a Bubblid ever could.

“Make us.” Bollabob crosses his thick, stubby arms across his chest.

And without realizing, perhaps controlled by some mysterious control panel somewhere in the nether, Kether-Lou’s arms shoot out, pushing the hairy Bubblid as hard as she can.

He flies backwards, taking Hilma-Lou and Dibly-Bob with him. Scandalized, Sirra-May leaps on Kether-Lou; the two Bubs tumble into Edilo-Bob.

War breaks out within the confines of booth number zero-zero-seven-nine-A.

Dincey-Lee, however, zips and zooms, dips and loops out of Sydney, the storm continuing to knock the bubble about.



## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

“WHAT’S GOING ON OVER THERE?!” She screams as she flies past a flock of misguided seagulls.

“WHAT’S GOING ON OVER THERE?!” Dincey-Lee’s voice amplifies through the leaf-covered screen. But nobody pays attention. Not even the benevolent Bathenda Fink, who stands at the entrance to the booth, with a look of disgust across her normally-serene face. Her bubble-nose wriggles with impatience, her arms are crossed at her waist. Her eyes dart from angry-Bubblid, to angry-Bubblid. And in the middle of it all: her sister-made.

“SIIIIILLLLLLLENNNNNNNNNCEEEEEEE!” She barely opens her mouth, but somehow her command carries across the entire gorge.

Every single Bubblid within earshot stops in their tracks; with those in mid-battle suddenly freezing mid-punch.

“Bathen-” Fiffamay begins from underneath Asta; whose clenched fist is raised directly above her enemy’s nose.

“Get up. Get her home.” The grand-high leader turns without another word.

Nobody moves. Not even Edilo-Bob, considered by many to be far-above such nonsense. Well, nobody moves except Dincey-Lee, who continues to ride her wild bubble as if she were a rodeo clown.

“COME ON, BUBS!” Dincey’s voice rings out; “WHO’S BROKEN MACHINE ARE YOU USING?!”

“Broken?!” Fiffamay scoffs, clearly offended. “Why should I...”

\*CRACK!\* Asta’s open palm connecting with Fiffamay’s smarmy wooden face sends a frosty chill

## BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK

down everybody's spine. The sound rings out in their ears, seeming to wake them all up. Even Fiffamay.

Asta, however, scrambles out of the booth immediately.

"Right, well- you heard Bathenda." Fiffamay refrains from rubbing her cheek; even if it is suddenly red-raw, and stinging madly.

"Anybody not in Fiffamay or Dincey's teams- OUT!" Edilo-Bob demands of the visiting brawlers.

"That includes you, Edilo." Kether-Lou weakly winks at him.

"I know- I know, can I trust you lot to work together?"

Kether looks at Bollabob, who looks at Jimbo-Bill, who looks at Sirra-May, who in turn shoots a blank look at the equally-blank Mora-Lou.

"Oh, for crying out loud- yes. Come on, team- let's show 'em why we're the best in the bubble-game." Fiffamay springs to her feet as if nothing happened. "Get ready with Jimbo's whip, Bolla- that's the only way to bring her in."

"On it, captain!" Bollabob hits a series of buttons on their much-more-advanced control panel.

"What can we do?" Humbo-Bob asks; having spent much of the fight in a headlock given by an unfamiliar Bubblid.

"Stand back, get ready to catch her."

"She's gonna fly in quick, so be prepared." Jimbo-Bill warns them whilst rubbing his now-sore left elbow.

## **BUBBLES IN THE OUTBACK**