

Inferno

The sky is filled with a beautiful sunrise. Tones of amber and russet crest the hillside, their golden hue shining through the morning mists. We proceed through the last of the city streets to top the brow, nature's normally picturesque idyll. As we approach the apex, the trees sway in a gentle breeze, but the air smells acrid and the true nature of the seemingly rosy sunrise is revealed. Thick clouds of smoke fill the skies and the gilded glow belies a terrible scene below. The world, it seems, is on fire.

Our engine pulls to a stop at a tented base of operations and the Captain swings down to consult with crews alongside us. We speedily gather our gear, patting down to check our suits and equipment and join the other firefighters staring steadily at the battle ahead of us. Our proby seems a bit tentative and whilst this is not my first fire, I recognise that look. It is fear at what we face; it is apprehension at the enormity of this task; it is also awe at the power of Mother Nature to destroy in hours what was once a thriving hillside of stunning nature trails. I turn her round to face the city we have just left, to see the empty houses that have had to evacuate in the night, to see the neighbourhoods we live in, the places we must save from this inferno. Our training kicks in, her eyes narrow and she nods – she may be new at this, but she will fight with everything she has to save our city.

Orders are issued and we split into teams. My team is on the frontline to hold back the blaze, the second team are to hack away what they can and dig a ditch to provide a firebreak, stopping the flames from spreading. As we haul our hoses up the hill, the temperature rises perceptively, and it becomes harder to see through the thick smoke. I wipe smut from my visor and check my ventilator. The air is flowing, but it feels hard to breathe. Wildlife flees the burning hillside all around us. Terrified birds screech up into the sky and helpless wallabies hurtle haphazardly through the brush, endangering any who step into their path. We pass the last of the nightshift, covered in grime and looking as if they have fought Hades himself in the early hours. They trudge heavily as they pass the mantle to us and we join the frontline.

Here it seems we have entered hell itself. Flames dance around us with a menacing glare, their march on the landscape an encroaching army, decimating everything in its path. The heat is intense. Sweat runs down my face, forming rivulets on my neck and I am soon

soaked to my skin. I shoulder the hose and wait for the pressure to kick in. Water streams from the hose, battling the advancing flames then evaporating into burning clouds of steam. The fire fills the air with intimidating crackles and our crews battle as one to halt the advance of the scorching enemy. Gallons of water are air-dumped from above us, splashing with the force of a bomb to flatten the enemy's fierce reach. My arms begin to ache, despite the hours of gym training I do to stay fit and strong, but I hold on, keep fighting.

Finally, after what feels like hours, I can see the flames being beaten back. We advance a few paces. The earth beneath my boots is blackened and crunchy, but the flames are finally vanquished, and we stand for a moment to survey the aftermath. It is a barren desert. As far as the eye can see is a blackened wasteland. A few shrivelled trees remain, but the hill is lifeless, its inhabitants have perished, victims to the blazing torture of the blaze. Our crew traipse wearily back down to the engine, for the moment we have won, yet the hillside behind us still smoulders. If the flames return, so will we, to quench their advance and save our homes.

Glossary

Proby – probationary firefighter, new to the job and still learning the skills

EXPLANATION FOCUS

1. How does the mood of the piece change from the first to the last sentence of the first paragraph?
2. The author uses examples of personification to describe the flames. Locate one and explain why it is effective.
3. Explain how the author makes this seem like a battle with the fire. Use words and phrases from the text to help explain your answer.
4. How do we know the firefighter cares about the animals from the fire?
5. Explain the contrast between the world of the hillside before the fire and what it looks like in the "aftermath".

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V

What does decimate mean?

V

What does tentative mean?

I

Why is the proby (new probationary firefighter) tentative?

R

What job does the firefighter have in the inferno?

R

Why is it important that the firefighter trains in the gym?

V

Find two words or phrases that show the firefighters are tired at the end of their shift?