

## **Forged by Flames: A Tale of Devastation and Sacrifice – Adya, Year 6, NSW**

The forest that once used to be thriving, now frightened Alfred.

Due to the sweltering heat, he was shaking and felt dizzy, not only from the scorching temperature, but also from gazing at the black, cindered trees. As Alfred's eyes scanned the desolate landscape, he was met with a vision of devastation. Tall, skeletal remnants of once-majestic trees reached towards the sky, their charred and blackened trunks stark against the backdrop of an ashen landscape. They were now frail, limping and lifeless like sticks of charcoal, no more vibrant than the old and crumpled lamp posts in the city. Many had toppled, their weakened structures unable to withstand the fierce inferno that ravaged this once-thriving woodland.

The burnt forest that lay before him was a haunting testament to the destructive force of the ravaging fire. The air that once used to be filled with the sweet scent of roses and a tranquil atmosphere was now a burnt hell, a painful assault on Alfred's senses.

The forest floor, once blanketed in a lush carpet of foliage, was now a barren expanse of ash and scattered debris. The ground beneath Alfred's feet crumbled softly, a fragile reminder of the destruction that occurred. Scorched leaves, brittle twigs, and lifeless branches littered the ground, their forms distorted and twisted by the intense heat.

Out of nowhere, a dreadful recollection surged into Alfred's mind—the memory of escaping the fire alongside Fred and James.

Flames raged fiercely, their scorching heat searing their feet. He could vividly recall Fred and James hastily rushing into their temporary camping tent, their arms flailing, and a worried countenance etched across their faces as they urged him to flee for his life. They had implored him to abandon the tent and make a dash away from the fire's epicentre.

As Alfred dashed away, his vision obscured by the thick shroud of fog that enveloped him, he stole one last glance at the spot where the calamitous fire had originated. It dawned on him that Fred and James had surreptitiously ventured out of the tent to start a campfire that had spiralled out of control. Reflecting on the catastrophic consequences of their actions, he yearned to obliterate that frightful memory. Their deeds had transformed a thriving village into a desolate ruin.

Though the mourning for what was lost would last a long time, the yearning for the noises of the creatures who once dwelt there will be irresistible. The crowing of the rooster and the gentle humming of the birds was unforgettable. The silence was palpable, broken only by the occasional rustle of wind through the skeletal remains. Nature's harmony was replaced by an eerie stillness, as if the forest itself mourned its own demise.

Yet, amidst the desolation, signs of resilience emerged.

Alfred could still see tender green shoots that had survived the fire cautiously pushing through the blackened soil. Life still persisted, determined to reclaim its place in this scarred landscape. Nature's cycle of birth, death, and rebirth was evident even in the aftermath of this devastation.

Alfred gazed at the city in despair, and he observed carcasses of homes burnt to ashes, leaving behind bricks covered in soot. Power lines crashed to the ground and power poles had charred to ashes, with splinters of woods scattered across the barren, windswept land. The cars were burnt to cinders and it looked as if there were pieces of metal dispersed across the red road.

The once lively and flourishing city of Timbucktoo had tragically transformed into a lifeless place, just because of them. His inner voice said, “Alfred, you realise you didn’t start the fire but maybe you could have done something to stop it.”

Alfred began coughing and spluttering due to the smoke in the air. Being as level-headed and calm as he was, he thought about the consequences and reached out for his gas mask. As he wore the mask, a sad memory overwhelmed him. He remembered Fred and James being rushed to the hospital with pipes and tubes in their mouth; multiple nurses surrounding them. He knew they were fighters and would battle for their life till the end.

Alfred felt choked and his lips trembled as beads of desolation slowly trickled down his face. His tear-stained face was puffy and swollen with grief. Alfred felt a surge of irremediable sorrow and a pining melancholy. A great pang gripped Alfred’s heart as he cried out in exasperation.

“You’re getting too emotional,” he whispered to himself, rubbing his eyes frantically as if to hide his tears from someone.

Suddenly, a paperboy appeared out of thin air on a creaking, ramshackled bicycle and yelled, “Newspape’. Come an’ collect your newspape’.”

He threw a piece of neatly rolled paper which Alfred opened gently. The headlines shook him, and he stood there awe-struck, the menacing aura held him in a tightening grip. What he read sent shivers down his spine and caused a sharp and cold prickling sensation to rush across his skin.

The headline read, “THREE SUSPECTS MISSING! SUSPICIOUS TEENAGERS MAY HAVE STARTED THE FIRE!”.

The article read that reporter Jack interviewed the parents of the three suspects.

“What are your thoughts about the news regarding your children causing the massive fire that broke out recently?” reporter Jack had asked.

“We ain’t even know if they are alive!” replied the sobbing mothers in unison.

“We hope they are alive, those childre’, and we plead ‘em on our hands and knees to come out and surrende’ to the law. If they ain’t done no wrong, there ain’t no need to run,” the fathers had mentioned.

The words “come out and surrender to the law,” echoed in his head, making him feel a sudden pang of guilt as if they were fugitives.

Alfred couldn't take any more of this damaging news. He felt shameful and guilty, even though the conflicting voice in his mind continued to remind him, "Alfred, you realise you didn't start the fire."

The world seemed to whir around Alfred as he became oblivious to his surroundings. A wet patch of perspiration formed under his collar and beads of sweat trickled down his forehead. An unsettling feeling dwelled inside him, and his heart started pounding. His skin lost colour, becoming chalk white.

What would he do? Confess for something he didn't do? Endless possibilities of the consequences of confessing rushed into his mind; being sentenced to jail, hung till death, ridiculed by everyone in the village or if he dared to think, he might manage to get away without any punishment. Alfred was always honest, but, in this case, a small part of him wanted to lie.

Alfred commenced his walk to the police station in Timbucktoo with a mindset of saving his friends. No force on earth could stop him from taking the blame and announcing to everyone that he was responsible for starting the raging fire that destroyed everything.

He would cover up for Fred and James's mistake.

He didn't care whether he would be sentenced to death or imprisoned for life.

He continued the tough 15km journey across the mountainous terrain in the scorching heat, with blistered and bruised feet. Nothing would stop him now.