



Morning came.

With that solar ascendancy began an event so indelible in its imprint, so transcendent in its beauty, so bound by an infinite possibility of mishaps that the closer it drew, the larger it grew, like a great lighthouse poking out amongst the fog-ridden seas.

In his twilight years, the fury of the flames still survived within the universe of memory, and with it came a rehashing of the apex event of his wildland firefighting career: that perfect moment where the camaraderie of the prison crew had yet to fall through the hidden traps of his personal life.

Echoes of the event cast forward until Gully's last moments as a living man.

When asked afterward about the burnout, he never recalled it but relived it, for it happened again and again.

The time for the prescribed burn drew on rapidly. Gully sat in the shade of a glade with two prisoners, Timber Tiger and Deadpool. They spoke of burnouts, of fire ecology, of what happened to a burned forest.

The flames weren't the end of the great pines; it was just another beginning, Gully explained. Forests needed destruction to clear out the dead and decaying so the new generation could take root.

King approached. She had planned for the burnout to occur before the burn window. She could've done it after, right before dusk. Gully understood her decision.

Best to lay down the flames before the heat of the day when temperature, relative humidity, and wind would come together in a perfect storm. Get the bulk of the burnout done before the burn window, and it would be over by the time conditions were at their hottest, with crews monitoring the burnout the rest of the day to ensure the fire stayed within its prescribed parameters.

Early morning marched toward the 1000-hour start time. All the crews assigned to the burnout drove to the spots they'd prepped the day prior. Here and there, smoke colored a sickly grey plunged through the skies with no definitive destination. There had been a wind all day, and it crescendoed in a whirling blitz. The gusts worked in the firefighters' favor by running downhill, away from the road they anchored off. This meant the flames would be suppressed downwards instead of encouraged up.

The crew boss gave clear and concise instructions for the day. Nobody showed any sign of disruption.

Gully was the lead lighter, anchored right off the road.

Within this profession, no feat carried a greater thrill than carrying the drip torch. To be the one dropping flames on the ground in a tactical drip here, another there, placing heat in a bulging underbrush, sending it through a knot of junipers, and searing bear grass with the potent trio of gasoline, diesel, and a burning wick.

The next lighter, Dirty Mike, was positioned ten feet downhill from Gully. The lead guard would stagger his burns, not starting until Gully had moved further ahead. This ensured Gully was out of the way when Dirty Mike started burning, and the guard's fires would extinguish as they met the blackened fuels that Gully had already burned.

The goal was to keep the fire intensity tightly bound in the parameters they had carved out yesterday. He assigned others in the crew to bear the torch, along with backups to switch out when folks got tired. Gully gave himself no backup. He was going until the end, just like yesterday.

1000 hit: Time to burn.

"Gully, go ahead and start," King said through the radio.

The foreman pulled his drip torch out from the bed of the truck: a knee-high metal cylinder filled with a 60 to 40 mixture of diesel and gasoline. Atop the cylinder was a circular locking ring with a casket that prevented fuel from leaking. Unscrewing the locking ring, Gully pulled out the inverted spout, flipped it upright, and screwed the locking ring back into place. That spout had a loop in the middle to prevent fuel from going back into the canister. Below the tip of the spout was a wick, a small bundle of flammable material that the fuel would pass over and ignite from before dropping to the ground as fire.

The crew boss tipped over his drip torch, soaking the wick with fuel. Unburnt fuel splashed on the ground in controlled spurts. He pulled out his lighter, lit it, and brought the flame to the wick. A small fire sparked into being. Gully tipped over the drip torch again; this time, the fuel came out in a stream of fire.

Ash drove up. Gully gave him a thumbs up. The burn boss drove down the road to tell the other crews to start laying down fire.

Another tip. Fire landed in a clump of grass, emitting a blissful hiss. Burnt to a blackened crisp. He inched forward, carefully dropping flames along the way. Twenty feet in, he looked back. A trail of fuels burned. Below it, Dirty Mike looked on, his eyes dead set on Gully.

"Go ahead!" Gully yelled.

The lead guard lit his drip torch and started burning the fuels upslope from him. Gully kept moving forward, dropping flame everywhere.

"Go ahead!" Dirty Mike shouted to the next torchbearer. It was Deadpool. The tattooed prisoner began.

The goal was simple: to generate as much energy as possible to destroy the fuel so the main fire downslope couldn't burn up the valley.

Given how close he was to the road, Gully didn't have much fuel to burn. Instead, he watched as the prison crew worked as one organism. The tremendous fire they had created bucked against the wind. Fire always strived to move upwards. The wind resisted with bursts that smacked the heat into submission. Still, the dancing tongues of ignition hungrily consumed fuels and fought the wind by ever-slowly creeping uphill. Noises from the big blaze astounded Gully with a giant whooshing as the fire consumed all the oxygen, growing in strength.

Waves of smoke flew into the air, and the fire receded with a hoarse roar before the wind, took another inhale of oxygen, and sped forth faster and more furiously. The wrath of the Apollonian monster possessed every fragment of the land. It had the illusion of control, but only burned within the parameters the firefighters had set.

The foreman dropped the final spurt of fire as he reached their endpoint. Ahead, another crew had begun to burn out their section of the land. Smoke entered his lungs at an alarming rate. He ate billows of the carcinogenic clouds.

On the road, an engine crew had their pump on and hose fully charged, ready to extinguish any embers that tried to make a fuss by burning where they shouldn't.

Gully felt some concern. Dirty Mike had yet to tie into the endpoint. He was only ten feet downslope. He should've been done. Gully bobbed and weaved around the fires he had created down to the unburned land assigned to the lead guard. Dirty Mike was squatting halfway between where he had started and where he was supposed to end.

"What's going on?" Gully yelled.

The lead guard looked up, squinting in the veil of smoke.

"Can't see a damn thing! How am I supposed to do a burnout when I can't see what I'm burning?"

Gully had an epiphany. "Stay here. Start dropping fire when the smoke clears. If things get sketchy, take the escape route up to the road."

"How's it gonna clear?"

"You'll see."

Gully reached into his line gear and pulled out a flare pistol. He loaded a flare into the chamber.

"Good Lord Almighty, are you packing?" Dirty Mike asked.

"You bet your ass. It's a flare gun. Now, I'm gonna go downslope, deeper into the interior. I think there's a little unburned sub-ridge down there. I saw it on the map the GIS guy gave us this morning. I'm gonna fire some flares into it. It should draw the smoke away from you."

Gully screamed all this, trying to get a decibel higher than the banshee winds. He ran further down the line. The smoke lessened as he descended.

Fires sputtered intermittently, mainly just skunking around in the duff. Nothing that was too dangerous to be around. Because they had limbed all the trees to head height yesterday, the flames had no lateral fuels to climb and use to spread into the crowns.

Deadpool had finished and was making his way up the escape route.

"What do I do now?" he asked.

Gully looked at his trail of work. Every spot of fuel was burning.

"Connect with Dirty Mike up there. Smoke is making it impossible for him to finish."

Deadpool left.

Gully went deeper, now out of the area they had prepped. He was walking through untamed flora that neither wanted to impede nor help his progress. It simply existed as a tangle of branches, brambles, and bushes. He holstered the very pistol in his belt and hacked through the undergrowth with his dad's Pulaski.

He came out into a fairly open spot with relatively little fuel except for the massive trees above. The flames crept around their bases, desperately searching for a foothold from which to grow upwards. The rest of the crew sat in a huddled mass, admiring the fires their hands had created.

"Get up and follow me. We got work to do!"

They all stood. Some wore bandanas as a makeshift filter against the smoke. They tried to follow Gully's instructions, but the sights kept them locked in place.

"Yo, we did this! Can you believe it?" PopTart said.

Across the prepped zone, fires burned the entire section the prison crew had been assigned. Smoldering became spreading as fire engulfed everything except the unreachable heights of the most mature trees. The wind lulled a little, stopping the spread of flames. Rather than conquer more land, the fires burned what they already held. It looked like hundreds of campfires, thousands of candlesticks, a million flares, all peppering the land in a terrific dance of incineration. It bore the expression of swelling yet never blew up greater than it was supposed to.

The main fire crept lazily just below the burnout, extinguishing in the hands of the already burned fuels it bumped into. King's pinpoint planning showed in this moment. Through her leadership, they had created a destructive burnout and yet somehow kept it within its apportioned confines: a miraculous balancing act.

"It's beautiful, gentlemen," Gully said, caught up in the moment. "Now, grab your trip torches. We've got to draw the smoke away from Dirty Mike!"

A sub-ridge struck out into the main fire. Everything on it was unburned. Gully wanted to scorch the entire thing. "With that finger

aflame," he explained, "it'll create another column of rising smoke and a vacuum at ground level that will suck in the smoke holding up Dirty Mike."

The crew followed Gully onto the sub-ridge. They reached an impassable wall of plant matter. The foreman took out his flare gun, aimed it at the heart of the barrier, shot a flaming missile into the fuels, reloaded another flare, and fired again. The flares hit with a plunk and hissed as they blew up into a swirl of hefty heat.

"Start dropping flames! Create chaos!" he shouted, his voice filled with urgent ecstasy.

The prisoners obliged. They indiscriminately flung fire far and wide while retreating off the sub-ridge back into the black. It was a symphony of precise pandemonium. Radiant tendrils struck forth across the organic material.

"Look at that shit, man!" Chocolate Thunder exclaimed, eyes wide with awe. "It's like a damn painting!"

Amber, gold, blood red: Colors from the fire pulsed with primal energy into a crackling chorus of snapping timber. The sentinel wood, up to forty feet tall, erupted in a shower of sparks. Gully wasn't concerned about it spreading. The sub-ridge was surrounded by black on all sides. There was no place for it to go.

This new plume of smoke sucked in the smoke uphill that was blinding Dirty Mike before discharging it into the sky.

"Back to the road!" the crew boss shouted.

They ran uphill, legs heavy with lactic acid. The torchbearers dropped some fire into the undergrowth that Gully had to hack through on the way down. They reached the prepped zone, bobbing and weaving around pockets of flame like slalom skiers. Dirty Mike's portion burned with managed ease. Deadpool and the lead guard waited for them on the road next to the engine crew.

The prisoners gathered, exchanging chest bumps, shoulder slaps, and unchained hollers. Gully observed his crew, viewing for the first time a cohesive unit capable of effective fire suppression.

Below them, the fire burned. And not just in their section. All across the upper third of the valley, from tree to shining tree, the burnout conducted itself with steadfast duty.

"We did this," one prisoner said, his voice filled with wonder. "We really did this."

Men who'd spent most of their lives incarcerated now stood above a flaming fray created by their own callused hands. The prisoners' eyes, beholding the infernal arc, reflected a burnout that would leave behind a destroyed landscape. But within this death, the seeds of tomorrow waited patiently, ready to rekindle the blank slate with fresh life.

So it was ordained in the natural order of wildfires—equally so within the men who stood witness. The wildfire and the image of the wildfire evolved from experience to memory as they blinked away dusty tears.