

It was funny how life was. On Holly's first day with regular duties reinstated, her entire shift had gone by without incident, right up until the end, when the alarm sounded. She had been learning how to maintain the wagon and how to wrestle hoses for most of the morning. The alarm had come just before lunch.

Now, she was sitting on the wagon, racing towards a fire, her belly empty, hungry, excited, nervous, and maybe just a little bit scared, even though she would never admit to that. She leaned on Toot Toot as the wagon took the corner at speed. She smiled, but then remembered that nopony could see her smile because of the face mask and respirator.

The iron covered wagon wheels threw off sparks as they clattered over the cobblestones. This was an old section of Manehattan, it didn't have smooth paved roads. The ride in the wagon was bone jarring and bounced everypony around.

As the wagon raced up the street, the burning building came into view.

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"Ten floor walk up," Toot Toot said as he stared up at the building. "I hate these places. At least the fire is in the middle." The pegasus stared upwards to assess the situation. "Airborne battalion, grab hoses and axes! We'll take the fight to the air."

Holly looked to Knock Knock, waiting for instruction. She was already sweating inside of her gear and shaking with excitement. Knock Knock was listening to some of the apartment residents and the on site landlord. After a moment, he stepped back and raised his hoof. He made a circular gesture, drawing the firefighters closer.

"Holly, you're with me. Sixth floor. Fizz Fizz, you and Rubber Ducky take the fifth floor. Everypony else, stay outside and spot. If you see fire in the windows, make it known. Everypony should be evacuated. Check anyway. The airborne battalion are going to get hose in and were going to take the Beast down, got it?"

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Coming off of the stairs of the sixth floor, Holly pushed the door open and found herself in a smoke filled hallway. It was dark, real dark, but no sign of flames. The fire had started in a fifth floor apartment; somepony had been smoking in bed, which Holly now understood was one of the leading causes of fires in the city. The fire had set the bed and the room ablaze and then the fire had crept out the window and had jumped to the second floor, igniting the curtains in an open window.

Holly could not help but feel that this could have been avoided if ponies didn't buy tacky polyester curtains. She pushed her way down the hallway with Knock Knock just behind her.

Knock Knock was rapping on the doors with his magic, banging away, making a lot of noise. Nopony answered. Ahead, a lot of smoke was pouring out from beneath a door.

The door itself was terrifying. The paint bubbled and blistered. The brass doorknob was glowing with heat. Holly pushed herself against the far wall as she maneuvered around the door, she was determined to check the entire floor for any ponies that might have stayed behind, perhaps taking a shower and ignoring the alarm.

The floor seemed clear. There were only eight apartment units on the floor, three on the right side, three on the left side, and one apartment at each end of the hall. Flames were now licking out from beneath the door to the apartment that was on fire.

“Holly!”

Ears perking inside of her helmet, Holly turned to look at Knock Knock. She could hardly even see him in the dense, billowing smoke. She tapped on the side of her helmet with her hoof, indicating that she had heard him.

“The Beast is escaping... you and I are going to soak down the hallway! I’m going to open up the firebox, we’re going to get the hose, and I’m going to open up the water valve... you’re going to take point, because you’re a big gal and I’m old and afraid and I’m gonna hide behind you!”

Inside of her mask, Holly smiled and nodded. Knock Knock was the bravest pony that she knew. She watched as Knock Knock opened up the firebox; he had to fight to get the door open. She saw him standing there, just standing, nothing else. She edged forwards and had a look.

The firebox was empty. There was no hose in the firebox. None at all. Holly could only think of one word to say in this situation, and it wasn’t a very nice one, but she said it anyway, unable to think of anything else.

“FRONK!”

Turning her head about, Holly could see that the carpet in front of the door was now on fire and flames were lapping at the walls. There was going to be Tartarus to pay for the empty firebox, but that would have to be dealt with later. Right now, she and Knock Knock were in a hallway with the Beast breathing down their necks.

“Toot is no doubt fighting the fire from the outside, sending water in through the windows, but getting to this hallway is tricky! We gotta stop the fire!” Knock Knock shouted.

“What do we do?” Holly asked.

"We get the airborne battalion to get us a hosepipe and we come through an empty apartment," Knock Knock replied.

"Sounds good." Wasting no time, Holly went for the first door in reach. It opened and Holly made her way through the apartment. She went to the window, opened it, and was grateful for the cold. She wondered why somepony would leave their windows open in the middle of winter, but it was a passing thought. There could be any number of reasons.

A watchful pegasus swooped over and Holly waved. "I need a hose! We've got fire in the hallway!" Holly watched as the pegasus darted away, he was [i]fast.[/i] She watched as ponies worked below, a hose had already been attached to the fireplug. Now, other hoses were being attached and a flight of pegasi lifted the hose up to the window where Holly was waiting.

The hose was empty and limp, but Holly knew it would change soon enough. "Knocker, keep feeding me hose! Keep my line free and untangled, I'm going after the beast!"

"Righto!" Knock Knock began to straighten out the hose and making sure that it didn't snag on corners or furniture. "Remember Holly, fan from side to side, start high, and work down! Let the water fall on the fire and soak in!"

Holly, holding the hose, felt it come to life. It filled with water, going stiff, becoming rock hard. She tried not to think about how badly she needed to get laid. Standing on two legs, she went stomping out of the apartment and into the burning hallway.

There was a lot of fire in the hallway, a whole lot of fire. Holly leaned forwards and pulled open the valve on the hose. It came to life in her hooves, spraying out a high pressure stream. It almost slipped free from her grip, but somehow, Holly held on. Leaning forwards, she began her slow advance towards the fire, dousing everything with water.

Back behind her, Knock Knock kept the hose fed, making sure it didn't get held up on anything. The hose was a heavy, living thing now, and almost as dangerous as the fire. One slip, one screw up, and the hose would be just as dangerous as the fire.

Holly aimed for the source, hitting the burning door with a stream of water. The charred wood splintered, shuddered, and then broke apart. The Beast thundered into the hallway, now fed by fresh air, the burning apartment with the open window allowed for the fire to advance into the hallway.

Gritting her teeth, the determined mare pushed forwards, undaunted by her terrifying foe. She laid down an even spray, aiming high, hitting the walls and the ceiling, and allowing the water to trickle down and rain upon the burning, blazing carpet. The fire hissed, spat, and sizzled.

For a time, it appeared that the Beast was dying, but then Holly saw something, and as she stood staring, she was certain that her eyes were playing tricks on her. A tiny little bipedal figure danced around in the flame, bouncing around, and making obscene humping gestures at her, gyrating its hips and pumping its arms.

Frowning, Holly turned the hose upon it, aiming for it directly. The water hit the burning figure, sending it sprawling, but did not put the fire out. "Oh you dirty little..." Holly grumbled inside of her respirator mask.

"OH CRAP!" Knock Knock shouted behind Holly. "Zebra alchemy! That's a fire gremlin! No wonder the window was open in the middle of winter, fumes!"

"What in fronking Tartarus is a fire gremlin?" Holly demanded as she focused the hose on it. "What am I looking at and how do I kill this thing?"

"Gremlins are alchemical manifestations, they're horrible and mischievous and dangerous!" Knock Knock shouted in reply. "You're going to see a lot of them, there are a fair number of zebras in the city!"

Gritting her teeth, Holly kept the hose focused on the flaming little gremlin. The flames flickered and died out. Holly had no time to savour her victory, she still had a fire to put out. She started her methodical fanning but then noticed something in the flames.

There were now two figures dancing in the flames. One was shaking its little behind at her, and slapping his hind section. The other was making lewd gestures while grabbing its flaming crotch.

Incensed, Holly turned off the hose, letting the pressure build, took careful aim, and then pulled back the lever to release the high pressure flow once more. The jet of water caught the crotch grabber full on and sent him flying down the hall, smashing him into the wall and extinguishing him.

The other lept up, let out a burning roar that was shockingly loud for its size, and dove into the middle of a burning mass of flames. Much to Holly's dismay, there were now three little gremlins where the lone survivor had stood. No pony had mentioned the magical hazards of working on this job.

A jet of water shot out of the burning doorway and struck the rightmost figure. It vanished, leaving behind two. Holly realised that Toots must be pushing his way through the apartment now to join her in the hall. The flames looked pretty heavy around the door.

“There are going to be citations for this, oh you’d better believe it! Alchemy without following the proper safety protocols! Public safety!” Knock Knock shouted. He fired off a spell, hitting one of the gremlins, and causing it to pop.

Which left one. Holly killed the water flowing from her hose, pulling the lever back. She allowed for pressure to build for a moment, took careful aim, and then yanked the lever, sending a high pressure jet towards the last gremlin. She hoped that this would kill it.

The water struck the burning gremlin, sent him sprawling, and rolled him into a puddle of steaming water. The gremlin hissed, fizzled, and then extinguished with a flash. Holly did not take time to celebrate her victory, she focused on putting out the rest of the fire in the hallway and the burning doorway. Now paranoid, Holly waited for more gremlins to show up.

Two hoses made short work of the flames and soon the burning doorway was nothing more than a sizzling, steaming mess. Holly continued to apply water to anything that was smouldering, as she had been instructed. The hallway was now filled with smoke and steam, somehow becoming even darker and harder to see.

At least the threat was over.