

Perchance To Dream....

Icabu

Fireman Chet Kelly dropped in his tracks as soon as he reached the hospitality tent. The brush fire raged on despite their best efforts. He rubbed a rough hand over his dirty face, knowing he should take the time to clean up, but not having the energy to do so. Hosing down a mountain side for twelve hours wasn't exactly his idea of a good time.

A faint smile flicked across his face for the volunteer that brought him a brimming cup of cool water, which he chugged gratefully. He leaned his head back and willed his tired, yet keyed up, body to rest. Snippets of the day's battles played through his mind like movie teasers at the matinee. Earlier, on Fire Road 17, the fire managed to jump across in front of them and seriously threatened to surround them. Chet shuddered at the thought. He sighed heavily, attempting to erase the hellish image. Stoker had backed the rig down the twisting and scary-narrow road with amazing speed and deft to save their rears. Their engineer definitely jumped several pegs on Chet's respect meter.

Soon, the weariness overtook his waning adrenaline and his chest rose and fell rhythmically in sleep.

"Fireman Kelly!" a deep voice boomed.

"Yes, Sir!" Chet answered crisply.

"This is your seventh attempt at the Engineer's test, isn't it?"

Chet's mouth gaped open, but no words spilled out.

"Well, isn't it?"

Chet groused at being reminded of his inability to do well on the Engineer test, yet he had to grudgingly admit the validity of the claim. "Yeah, I guess it might be that many, but..."

"You must pass the test this time or we'll bust you back to Boot!" the voice boomed in a most threatening tone.

Chet swallowed hard. "Yes, sir," he muttered through clenched teeth.

"What's that, Kelly? Did you say something? Speak up, man!"

"YES, SIR," Chet yelled at the now annoying voice.

"Better. Now, let's get started. You are ready, aren't you?"

Chet took a deep breath before answering. "Yes, sir." Sweat began to bead on his forehead.

"Good. First question...What psi would you run on your pump's stage two with another pumper feeding your rig from an outside source 300 meters away on a four percent grade?"

Chet's brain froze somewhere between 'pump's stage two' and 'outside source'.

"Well?" "WELL?"

"Just give me a minute," Chet stroked at his mustache. "What was the grade again?"

"Question two, Fireman Kelly....What is the smoke displacement rate of a three-story building, thirty rooms per floor, with a twenty percent oxygen saturation?"

Chet's mouth dropped open again. Confusion knitted his brow. "Smoke displacement rate?"

"Yes, Fireman Kelly. Smoke displacement rate. What is your answer?" The voice took on an impatient tone.

Chet shrugged in defeat. "I don't know. I've never heard of a 'smoke displacement rate'...."

"Question three....Using the Heat Conduction equation, calculate the thermal conductivity of a wall with a surface area of 10 square meters, thickness of 30 cm, and a heat source at 200°C."

Color drained from Chet's face. "I....I don't know..."

"Let's see if you know your way around a pumper. This way, Fireman Kelly."

Chet walked...and walked....and walked. Finally, a huge red fire engine came into view. Mist swirled around it. There were more gauges, knobs, buttons, and switches than Chet had ever seen in his life, stretching down the overly long side of the mountainous vehicle. He gawked at the array of controls and gauges, dumbfounded.

"You're at a three alarm fire, Kelly," the voice instructed. "You need to knock down flames from roof to basement on a twenty story apartment complex. People's lives are depending on you to do this as quickly as possible – civilians and brother firemen. Get to it, Kelly. Evaluation starts...NOW!"

Firemen came at Chet with an array of hoses. He did his best to hook them up to outlet gates. Some were six inches in diameter! Chet gave up attempting to calculate the water pressure required by the mass of hoses. He throttled up the engine and hoped the pump would take it. He gated the smaller lines to 200 psi and the larger lines at 250 psi. After attaching the last hose, he watched the pressure gauges like a hawk – nearly getting dizzy as his eyes shifted from gauge...to gauge...to gauge. He reached out to adjust a gate and the lever came off in his hand. Water suddenly sprayed out the side of the truck and then shot out the top of the truck like a sheared off hydrant, soaking Kelly as he frantically attempted to shut down the pump.

"You have FAILED, Fireman Kelly. FAILED!" The voice boomed painfully loudly.

Chet's head jerked up. His heart pounded in his chest and sweat dripped in his eye. He looked around quickly, searching for the deep voice that had drilled him. All he could see were firemen and volunteers milling around the hospitality area. He got up and strode purposefully towards the assignment trailer. He would rather take his chances with this brush fire than rest at the moment.

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Marco Lopez noticed that Chet had collapsed in the corner of the hospitality area, but he needed to get his eyes washed out before joining his crewmate. He saw that Kirk and Wheeler with 110s were manning the aid station. Marco went up to Kirk since he wasn't interested in having his picture in the newspaper.

"Hey, Marco," greeted Kirk. "What's up?"

"Hey, Kirk." Marco knew not to rub his eyes, but his hands twitched with want to do so. "I need about a pound of ash and grit washed out of my eyes."

"Sure thing, sit right over here." Kirk directed Marco to a folding chair with a bag of saline IV solution hanging overhead. "Lean your head back. Yeah, like that." Kirk unclamped the IV line and the refreshing liquid poured into Marco's bloodshot eyes. He gently and thoroughly rinsed each irritated eye. "There, that should be better."

Marco leveled his head and blinked several times. "Much better, thanks."

Kirk reset the clamp on the IV line, readying the make-shift eyewash for its next use. "You guys having a tough time of it out there?"

"Real tough," Marco sighed. "We don't seem to be making any headway."

Kirk shook his head. "They keeping Roy and Johnny on the hose crew?"

"Yeah, they're humping hose like the rest of us, I gotta admit." Marco noted Kirk's clean uniform. "No cushy aid station job for them this time."

Kirk winced at Marco's jab. "Hey, we're here to serve." He dipped in an exaggerated bow to Marco.

Marco saluted. "And my eyes appreciate it. Hope we don't keep you too busy."

Kirk nodded. "You and me both."

Marco strolled across the dusty lot and grabbed a burger and a cup of water. He searched for the spot he had seen Chet resting, but didn't find him. He went to a quiet corner to rest his weary bones for the remainder of his all-too-short break. The spot provided comfort enough for Marco to nod off after just a

couple minutes of resting his eyes.

*The klaxon blared. "Station 51. MVA. Corner of Wilmington and Alvarez. Wilmington and Alvarez. Time out, 1610.*

*Marco ran for Big Red. He chased the engine as Mike pulled out of the bay and jumped up at the last minute, sliding into his seat across from Chet.*

*At the scene, Roy and Johnny ran to the involved vehicles to assess injuries. Captain Stanley instructed Chet to take the reel line and wash down any leaking gasoline and debris. Mike manned the pump.*

*"Cap, what do you need me to do?" Marco asked.*

*Captain Stanley looked at Marco like he'd never seen him before. "Uh....go check if Roy or John need any help."*

*"Okay, Cap." Marco ran over to the car where Johnny was working. "Hey, Johnny. Need a hand with anything?"*

*The young paramedic kept his attention on his tasks. "Um...no, thanks. I have a handle on things."*

*Marco stared in disbelief. Johnny worked the Jaws with one hand, while starting an IV with the other – the bag clinched in his teeth. His foot applied pressure to a gash in the victim's thigh.*

*"Johnny, I can run the Jaws for you," Marco offered.*

*"Nope, got it," Johnny mumbled around the IV bag. "See if Roy needs a hand."*

*Marco backed away slowly, then turned and ran toward the van where Roy was working. "Hey, Roy, how can I help you?" Marco watched in amazement as Roy prepared to deliver a baby while doing CPR on a badly injured victim in the van.*

*"I've got this covered, Marco," Roy answered between CPR breaths. "Does Johnny need a hand?"*

*“Uh...no, Roy. He said he had everything under control, too.” Marco stood rooted, staring with unbelieving eyes. Sweat trickled down Marco’s face just watching, yet Roy appeared cool and calm. “I can take over CPR for you.”*

*“Doing fine here,” Roy paused his rhythm to respond. “You could check with Chet.”*

*Marco nodded. As he stepped away, he heard a baby’s cries emerging from the van. He found Chet a bit further down the road. To his surprise, there was an overturned tanker truck with flames soaring into the air. Somehow, he had missed that when they came on scene...*

*Again, Marco stared, astonished - Chet blanketed the flames with two two-and-a-half inch hoses, one under each arm, and a foam tube held between his legs. “Chet, what can I do to help?” Marco had to yell to be heard over the roar of the fire and hiss of the hoses.*

*Chet looked back at Marco with his ‘cheesy’ grin. “Got this under control, Marco. Maybe Mike needs a hand.”*

*Marco continued to stare at Chet, stumbling over the hose lines, as he retreated to the engine. His eyes widened with more astonishment as he turned to see Mike working the controls of the engine and a foam truck parked right next to Big Red. “Mike, can I help you with something?”*

*Mike adjusted a gate and then turned to Marco with a grin. “Nah, this is the easy job, remember.”*

*“Sure...” Marco found the grin on Mike’s face the most out-of-place occurrence of this run. He jogged back to Captain Stanley, who stood in the middle of the chaotic scene, HT at the ready, directing the hard-working crew. “Cap,” Marco addressed his boss. “No one seems to need my help. What do you need me to do?”*

*Captain Stanley surveyed the scene once more. “Looks like everything is under control here, Marco. Why don’t you just sit on the engine’s tailboard and relax. We’ll be done shortly.”*

*Marco skulked back to the engine. He couldn't believe no one needed any help. He plopped down on the tailboard....*

Marco's body jerked awake. He looked around quickly to orient himself, not realizing he had nodded off so quickly. Inhaling the smell of burning brush smoke that hung in the air brought him back to the present. "Yes," Marco whispered to himself. "I know I'm needed here." He spotted Chet by the assignment trailer and jumped up to join his crewmate.

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John Gage went directly to the food trailer. He chomped down two burgers and gulped three cups of water before his partner even got in line. The third burger was consumed more slowly as the hunger was sated and the exhaustion of nearly half a shift of hot, sweaty strenuous work settled into his thin frame.

He saw Marco in a quiet corner catching a quick nap and thought the idea appealing. To not disturb his crewmate, Johnny found an empty chair in the back of the make-shift canteen where it was dark and quiet. He leaned the chair on the back legs and rested it against the plywood wall, folding his turnout coat for a pillow. The relaxing position soon produced the desired effect and the weary, fire-fighting paramedic soon nodded off.

Johnny shrugged into his air pack, joining his partner for instructions from Captain Stanley. An apartment complex blazed before them.

"DeSoto," Captain Stanley addressed the senior paramedic. "There are three injured residents over there. Check them out."

"Gage," Captain Stanley addressed the junior paramedic. "We have a report of an elderly gentleman trapped on the third floor, room 315."

"Right, Cap," Johnny acknowledged and ran into the burning building. He flew up the three floors of stairs and crawled down the heavily smoky hall to room 315. The door was locked, but not hot. He banged on the door, yelling that the fire department was there to rescue the man. No response. He repeatedly kicked at the door, but multiple locks stubbornly defeated his efforts. Knowing that he needed something substantial against the fortified door, he ran

down the three flights of steps to retrieve an ax from the engine and then sprinted back up the three flights of steps. He hacked a hole in the door big enough to reach in and unfasten the seven locks. Finally, he began searching for the elderly man – crawling room to room as the thick smoke poured in through the damaged door.

The old man was hiding under a bed, unconscious and not breathing. Inhaling from his mask and puffing the life-giving oxygen into the elderly man's lungs, Johnny brought life back from the brink. He shouldered the semi-conscious man and ran for the stairs, stopping at each landing to give his mask to the victim for several breaths.

Flames had reached the first floor landing. Johnny yelled for assistance, backing up the steps to stay out of reach of the fire, continuing to swap his mask with the victim. The heat radiating up the stairway threatened to overwhelm him. Chet and Marco finally arrived and hosed the flames down, along with Johnny and his victim. Soaking wet from sweat and the fire hose, he ran the man out to the squad for treatment.

"Gage," Cap called.

"Yeah, Cap?" Johnny still hadn't caught his breath from the rigorous rescue.

"There's a damsel in distress on the west wing, second floor lobby. You'll have to take a ladder to the window." Captain Stanley pointed to the window with a lady waving frantically.

"Right, Cap," Johnny acknowledged. He got the ladder off the engine and ran over to the west wing. Just as he was about to raise the ladder, the lady produced a baby bundled in a blanket and dropped it. Johnny let go of the ladder just in time to catch the baby. He dropped to the ground to absorb the energy of the fall. He grimaced in pain as his ribs painfully rolled across the prone ladder. Gasping for breath, he got to his feet and sprinted the baby back to the squad where Roy began treatment. Johnny returned to the ladder and gingerly climbed to the second floor lobby window. The now frantic lady grabbed around his neck, refusing to let go. Unwilling to climb down the ladder herself, Johnny managed to get

her on his back, 'piggyback' style, her knee digging into his already bruised and sore ribs. He dropped painfully to the ground as they reached the squad, cradling his injured ribs; the woman ran over to see about her baby.

"Gage," Cap called again.

Johnny groaned in response.

"There's a young boy trapped in the laundry room in the basement," Captain Stanley reported.

Johnny looked around for Roy, but he was busy with the victims.

"Right, Cap," Johnny wheezed. He ran back into the burning building and down to the basement. The young boy was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He gathered the boy in his arms and turned to go back up the stairs. A loud groan and piercing snap froze Johnny. The ceiling collapsed at the top of the stairs, sending a wave of debris down the steps. Johnny quickly set the boy down, shielding him with his body. Debris slammed into the paramedic and threw them against the concrete wall.

Pain washed over Johnny as he huddled over the boy. His hand came away red with blood when he wiped by his left eye. Trying to stand, he pushed debris off his back but his left leg wouldn't hold his weight. Through aching ribs and his pounding head, he grabbed a stick to use as a crutch and managed to pull the boy up on his right hip. Inch by inch, he crawled over the debris pile and finally made it to the first floor doorway. Marco reached out from above and took the boy. Johnny limped behind with his make-shift crutch. He collapsed by the squad, safe at last.

"Gage," Cap called once again.

Johnny couldn't even muster a groan. His eyes refused to focus on his boss.

"You have one more rescue, John."

"No....more....Cap," Johnny moaned.

“Leg’s....busted....concussion....ribs....”

“John,” Cap said with a serious face. “When the ceiling collapsed, Roy ran in to assist. He went through the floor. He’s pinned. You have to get him out...”

Johnny paled even more. “Nooooooo.....”

Johnny’s chair jarred down on all four legs as he jumped awake. Sweat soaked dark stains on his uniform shirt. He wiped his brow, relieved when his hand came away wet but not red. Looking around the room he grinned as he spotted Roy sitting at a table with his head down, resting. After rubbing the short nap out of his eyes, Johnny flung his turnout over his shoulder and went to get in the food line again.

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Roy DeSoto barely downed his first hamburger before the total fatigue of nearly twelve hours of hosing brush took over. Right at the table, he folded his arms and rested his head on them. He slipped into an exhausted sleep almost immediately.

*“I’ll ride in with him, Johnny,” Roy said as they loaded the unconscious drunk in the ambulance. “He may wake up and aspirate.”*

*“Okay,” Johnny acknowledged. “I’ll be right behind you.”*

*“Rampart, Squad 51,” Roy said into the biophone handset. “ETA’s about twelve minutes.”*

*“10-4, 51,” came Dr Brackett’s baritone voice.*

*The victim began to cough. “I expected as much,” Roy said to himself. He rolled the victim on his side to keep the emesis from being aspirated into his lungs. When the deed appeared to be complete he rolled him back on the gurney.*

*Shock drained Roy’s face. The victim on the gurney was his boss. “Cap?” croaked Roy as his confused mind attempted to register that his captain’s pained eyes gazed up at him from the gurney.*

*“Help me, Roy....” Captain Stanley gasped. “Help....me....”*

*Roy closed his eyes briefly, then glanced out the back windows of the ambulance as an eerie shiver ran down his spine. The squad followed, lights flashing. Roy registered that normalcy, but they didn't appear to be any closer to Rampart. He turned back to the gurney....Captain Stanley still lay in it.*

*Roy kept his eyes glued on his patient and slowly spoke into the biophone handset. “Rampart, Squad 51.”*

*“Go ahead, 51,” replied Dr Early.*

*Roy briefly wondered what happened to Dr Brackett. “Patient is diaphoretic. BP is now 90 over 60. Pulse is 110 and weak. Respirations 15 and labored.”*

*“51, start two IVs full bore. D5W and Ringer's,” instructed Dr Brackett.*

*Roy stared at the handset as Dr Brackett's voice returned. “10-4, Rampart. D5W and Ringer's wide open.”*

*Roy completed the IVs and the patient began to cough and sputter. His captain's breathing became more labored.*

*Roy's knuckles were white as he gripped the biophone handset. “Rampart, Squad 51.”*

*“51, go ahead,” responded Dr Morton.*

*Roy paused a tic as now Dr Morton's voice responded. “Rampart, the patient is experiencing extreme difficulty breathing. He must have aspirated earlier. Respirations are 8 and shallow.”*

*“51, insert an esophageal airway,” instructed Dr Brackett.*

*“10-4, Rampart. Esophageal airway.” Roy shook his head as Dr Brackett's voice responded again.*

*Roy gathered his equipment and straddled the gurney to best insert the airway. When he looked down, Johnny – his partner – gazed back at him, pale, drenched in sweat, with a blue tinge to his lips. Roy froze with shock. Confused, he quickly looked out the back window again. No squad followed, all sense of normalcy fled. The eerie tingle ran up his spine, causing a shudder.*

*Johnny coughed and wheezed.*

*Roy shook off his confusion and carefully guided the airway down his partner's throat. He attached the oxygen and listened for breath sounds.*

*"Rampart, Squad 51."*

*"Go ahead, 51," responded Dixie McCall.*

*"Rampart, esophageal airway inserted. Bilateral breath sounds with some rales." Roy reported the vital information to whoever was on the other end of the line.*

*Johnny moaned and went still, his eyes closed.*

*Roy felt for a carotid pulse. It was very weak. He grabbed the datascopes and placed the paddles on Johnny's chest to view the heart's rhythm. His own heart pounded...V-fib! He gelled the paddles and set the defibrillator for 200 watt seconds. At the tone he jolted his partner's heart. No conversion. Again, the electric jolt convulsed his partner's body. To Roy's relief, the datascopes finally displayed a sinus rhythm.*

*"Rampart, Squad 51."*

*"Go ahead, 51," replied Dr Early. Roy no longer registered the owner of the voices coming across the handset.*

*Roy kept his eyes on the datascopes's steady blips. "Patient went into v-fib. Second hit converted."*

*He looked back at the gurney and dropped the biophone handset. Joanne, his wife, lay on the gurney. Roy paled. He could barely*

*breathe. The eerie feeling now tingled his entire body. He found it nearly impossible to speak or even move.*

*“Send me a strip, 51,” instructed Dr Brackett.*

*Training kicked in and Roy reached for the handset - without taking his eyes off his wife’s pale face.*

*“Um...10-4, Rampart,” mumbled Roy, running in auto-mode.*

*As he reached for the leads to patch in to the biophone, Roy saw the squad behind the ambulance again, but it no longer provided any sense of normalcy. They were still no closer to Rampart, but none of that mattered. Roy’s mind concentrated on only one thing now – Joanne.*

*Roy patched in his wife, listening to the blipping rhythm of her heart.*

*That rhythmic blipping abruptly changed to a piercing monotone warning, which stabbed fear into Roy’s soul.*

*“51, flat-line!” came Dr Early’s urgent voice over the biophone.*

*“Noooooooo....”*

Roy’s head snapped up. His heart pounded and his stomach threatened to eject the hamburger he ate earlier. Swallowing hard, he blinked the sleep out of his eyes and glanced around. Reality returned when he spotted his partner chatting with a pretty female volunteer at another table. Roy shook his head to clear the cobwebs and stepped out into the smoky air, which still felt refreshing. He passed by Big Red on his way to the latrines and noted Mike stretched out in his driver’s seat, eyes closed.

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Mike Stoker brought the tired engine to a stop by the fuel and water tankers. As the crew disembarked and headed for a fill up, he took care of filling up his rig. She was running on empty on fuel and water. Frowning, he noticed all the dust and ash had faded her bright red to a dull umber.

A scuffing sound took Mike’s attention from his rig. He smiled and thanked the

elderly volunteer that brought him a bag with a couple of burgers and a big cup of water from the canteen. Mike smiled as the gentleman cast an appreciative look at his battle-worn rig as he shuffled away.

After filling up both himself and his rig, and filling out all the paperwork, Mike settled into his comfy seat. A harsh light caught his eye as a news crew cornered Chief McConnike over by the command tent. Mike was glad he didn't have to deal with those nuts. He stretched his legs and let his head drop back, closing his eyes to block out the glaring camera light. Sleep came quickly to the weary engineer.

"Mike," Captain Hank Stanley called out for his engineer.

"Yeah, Cap?" Mike Stoker responded from the kitchen.

"Can you come into the office for a minute?"

Mike raised an eyebrow to his crewmates and strode into the Cap's office.

Mike's curiosity was piqued when he saw Dan Frieze, the department's public relations officer, in the Cap's office. He shook Dan's hand. "What's up, guys?"

Hank leaned back in his chair and gestured toward Dan.

"Mike, we have a great opportunity to showcase the Fire Department to the rest of the country," Dan explained.

"We?" Mike asked defensively.

"It's a once in a life time opportunity. Chief Houts is behind this effort 110%," Dan added.

Mike remained quiet.

"You see," Dan explained, "there's a network TV show in the works that will showcase a fictional, but very realistic, LA County fire station."

Mike's silence continued.

“The network is so concerned about accuracy that they want a real fireman to run the fire engine.” Dan looked right at Mike. “You’re the first name that came to my mind. Professional. Good looking. Perfect.

“What do you think, Mike?” urged Dan.

Mike gave no response.

“Did I mention that Chief Houts really likes this idea?” Dan reiterated.

Mike sighed. “When does shooting start?”

“That’s the spirit, Mike. I knew I’d picked the right guy,” Dan beamed.

“When?” Mike repeated.

“You’ll shoot your scenes on your four day breaks. And, hey, you get paid for it too,” Dan rubbed his hands together.

“All I have to do is run the engine?” Mike wanted to verify this point.

“Sure, Mike, sure. They know you aren’t a real actor,” assured Dan.

“Okay, I suppose,” relented Mike.

“Great! You’ll report to Monument Studios, stage 44, a week from Thursday,” informed a gleeful Dan.

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“Just read the lines, Mike baby,” the director nearly begged.

Mike squirmed in his much-too-tight uniform shirt and took a deep breath, threatening several of the buttons. “Hey, we have a flail chest over here...need an IV, stat.” Mike repeated the lines.

“Cut,” the director called for the seventh time. “More feeling, Mike baby. Feel it. Action!”

"Hey, we have a flail chest over here. Need an IV, stat!" Mike stood up from the fake victim. "Man, I'd never say this. I'm not a paramedic, I'm the engineer."

"Cut!" the director called for the eighth time. "Mike baby..."

"I'm not your baby," Mike said sternly.

"Fireman Mike," the director corrected. "Just say the lines. We need you to just say the lines."

"I was told this show is supposed to be as close to the real thing as possible. I would never diagnose a victim. I'll perform CPR all day, or splint a simple fracture when the paramedics call for it, or run the Jaws or K-12." Mike paced in front of the frustrated director, arms waving in emphasis.

Mike looked at the pretty-boy actor pretending to be an LA Co. Fireman/Paramedic, a sneer of disgust on his face. "This guy's supposed to be a paramedic and he put the IV in the wrong way!" Mike's tirade twisted his two-sizes-too-small shirt, adding discomfort to his agitation. He tugged at the tourniquet-tight sleeves and pulled on the taught button placard, attempting to keep the dignified appearance the real uniform demanded. "And this shirt is just too tight!"

The director sighed. "Now he emotes...."

Dan Frieze appeared on the set. "Mike... Mike. We need you to work with us on this. It's important to the department."

"I can't do this, Dan!" Mike's ire rose - his face reddened and veins in his neck bulged. He shot Dan a piercing glare. "It isn't right. What good'll it be for the department to show us doing our jobs all wrong?"

"Mike," Dan placated. "It's just a TV show. Work with us."

"No!" Mike adamantly refused. He tapped the fake badge on the too-tight fake uniform shirt. "I take the REAL badge to heart, Dan. It represents what I am - an LA County Fireman Engineer...and a damn good one at that." He waved his hand at the cameras, lights,

and director. "I can't do this," he insisted, storming off the set.

Dan caught up to Mike as he reached his car. "Mike," Dan pleaded. "We need you on this show."

"You don't need me, Dan. You need a monkey - a trained monkey - to dance to your tunes, not an engineer. You can call me when you get a TV show that really wants to depict the department the way it is - make the actors go through paramedic training, make them do ride-alongs on a rig." He slammed his car door.

Mike jumped at the sound of a door slam. He sat up, blinked the slumber away, and saw that Engine 110 had parked next to him, its crew exiting the rig. Mike looked around, relieved to not see any more cameras, lights, or directors. He did see Captain Stanley headed towards him. He jumped down to greet his captain. It must be time to head out and fight the real battle.

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Captain Hank Stanley stepped down from the rig and stretched his cramped and aching muscles. He watched the guys head out for food and recuperation. He noted that dutiful Mike was getting the rig fueled and filled before seeing to his own needs. Hank smiled as an elderly man, volunteering at the hospitality area, handed him a bag of burgers and a large cup of water. Hank carried his meal to the C & C tent, mainly to check on progress.

Hank frowned as he looked at the operations board. They had maybe 20-25% containment. It definitely looked like they would spend the second half of the shift out here too. Hank took a seat at a back table to eat. He was almost too exhausted to be hungry, but knew he had to eat anyway. His thoughts drifted back over the past twelve hours.

It was different having Gage and DeSoto on the rig. It gave him twice the worries, even though they were veteran firemen. Moments of the day's events flooded his thoughts. Gage's disappearing act nearly gave him a heart attack. Only Gage could pick the exact spot to stand that collapsed into the canyon below. Luckily, the young man had kept a tight grip on the hose and they used that to quickly pull him back up - no damage done except frayed nerves. That incident unnerved Hank more than the fire raging all around them - the unforeseen incidents that command couldn't control. It wasn't that Gage was being careless, all of the guys were at the edge hosing down a hot spot just

below their position. Hank made sure that everyone stood well back from the edge to battle the flames after that near disaster.

Hank leaned back in the chair and stared out the window. He forced his thoughts to drift.....his eyelids grew heavy.....and slid closed.

*“Gage! DeSoto!” Captain Hank Stanley called for his paramedics. The two men appeared in front of him. “Battalion reports two employees in a lab in the northeast corner. Room 242.”*

*“Right, Cap,” chorused Roy and Johnny. The paramedics ran into the burning Lab Tech building.*

*The sound of breaking glass and shouts caught Hank’s attention. He turned and saw a couple of men hanging out a second story window. He felt a pat on his shoulder as his engineer, Mike Stoker, ran past him with the ladder. Hank stepped up to the controls on the engine. Chet and Marco had a two-and-a-half inch line on the second floor. He watched as Mike swiftly climbed the ladder to the window, but the men were no longer visible. Mike disappeared into the building through the window.*

*The hair on Hank’s neck tingled. On his orders, all of his men were now in this highly volatile building. Butterflies stirred in his stomach. This just didn’t feel right. He grabbed the handi-talkie. “HT 51, Engine 51.” The wait for a response seemed to take forever. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.*

*“HT 51,” DeSoto finally responded, voice muffled from his air mask.*

*“DeSoto, the employees are at the north facing window. Mike has the ladder up and is in the building to assist them. Do you see them?”*

*Hank endured another interminable delay.*

*“Negative, Cap. The smoke is thick in here. We’re making our way to the corner windows,” relayed DeSoto.*

*“10-4, HT51. Chet and Marco are up there also. Be on the lookout.”*

*“10-4, 51.”*

*More waiting. Hank glanced over the pressure gauges on the engine again. Then the most horrifying sound rent the air and the concussion knocked Hank into the side of the engine, face first. Stunned, he turned to see the northeast corner of the building collapsed into a jumble of smoldering rubble. The whining of the pump snapped him around and he shut down the rig. The sudden quiet was deafening.*

*He slid to the ground, numb and trembling. He had just lost his entire crew!*

*“Hank,” a voice called.*

*He looked up into Chief McConnike’s somber face.*

“Hank,” Chief McConnike called again.

Hank’s eyes flew open and fixed on McConnike, refusing to focus.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, Hank,” stated McConnike.

Hank stood and took in his surroundings - relief flooded his mind. He shoved his shaking hands behind his back, cleared the knot in his throat, and blinked his eyes into focus.

“Your crew ready to head out, Hank?” McConnike regarded the captain closely.

“Uh, yeah, Chief,” blurted Hank. “We’re ready.”

“Good, good.” McConnike walked up to the operations board. “We need some support up here, in the northeast quadrant.”

Hank paled slightly. “Northeast...” he mumbled.

McConnike turned back to Hank. “You okay, Hank?”

“Sure, Chief,” Hank nodded anxiously. “We got it. Northeast. Up by Tanner Canyon.”

McConnike gave his quirky captain a guarded look, and then returned to the map. "Yes, start at Tanner Canyon and work back towards Bently Road. Fire roads 24 through 27 are reported open, at least for now."

"Okay, Chief. We're on the way," Hank acknowledged and made a hasty exit.

Hank headed toward Engine 51 just as Engine 110 pulled up alongside. He stopped and let 110s tired crew pass by. Mike joined him by the engine.

"You ready, Mike?" Hank asked his engineer.

"Yeah," answered Mike.

Hank saw that the other four crewmen were also on their way to the engine. Hank smiled. It was good to have the group together again - real good.

"Hey, Mike," Chet called as they climbed aboard.

"What?" Mike responded as he turned the Cole-Hersee and then pressed the starter buttons. The rig roared to life.

"Have you ever heard of a 'smoke displacement rate'?"

Mike answered the oddball question with a glare.

"Tanner Canyon, Mike," Hank directed.

Mike gave Hank a nod.

"I think we'll get this fire knocked down tonight and get back before dawn," announced Marco as they bumped along.

"That's mighty optimistic of you, Marco," countered Chet as he looked at the glowing hillside. "Maybe you can help Gage stay on his feet, too."

"Shut up, Chet," snapped Johnny and echoed by Marco and Roy.

Hank sighed contentedly as the crew chatted and barbed at each other. They might be an unruly bunch, but they were his bunch.

*Thanks to Karen! And a (deep) thanks to Rose!*