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Code W

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## SONYA LARSON

### *Code W*

Chuntao wanted to love her job, but the Visitors kept dying.

The first was a bright-eyed, ambitious computer scientist, freshly inspired from watching rock-climbing “RockStars” on YouTube. He fell from Mount Siyeh at a height of three hundred feet. *White male*, Chuntao recorded in the official logbook, the letters ragged from her shaking hand. *Age 25. Solo climber.*

The second, newly divorced, wandered into the backcountry desert. According to her blog, which Chuntao read late one night, she was coming to Glacier National Park to “find myself.” At some point, she wandered off-trail, got lost, got confused, ran out of water, and attempted to signal for help by burning her backpack and tent. Near the end, evidence indicated that she tried squeezing water droplets from shrub-grass into the basin of her eyeglasses case. She was found approximately one week later by a family, whom Chuntao—along with the hiker’s ex-husband—also had to comfort.

*White female*, wrote Chuntao. *Age 52. Solo hiker.*

“This is whack,” said Chuntao, rolling her chair away from the Dispatch desk. She pulled off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, but now she hated the thought of glasses and tossed them aside too. She was angry at the woman. And anguished. Since when were Visitors so reckless? She felt like an old friend or a parent, furious with love.

“Correct,” the Chief Ranger told her. “It’s truly senseless. But it’s also simple reality. These are human beings we’re talking about. We’re not exactly the wisest of species.” He was a fussy, focused man, always roving about the Ranger Station and pointing out factual inaccuracies, his precise gaze defying his body, which was the size and shape of a refrigerator. Chuntao felt awkward calling him Chief—this yellow-haired bureaucrat from Boise—but after one week of Training, she watched him with bewildered awe. How the hell had this guy’s intensity survived a whole decade on Dispatch?

“Is this really part of the job?” Chuntao said. “How many hours can a person take?”

“If you want the promotion,” said Chief, “then three hundred fifty per year.” He rolled Chuntao’s chair right back to her desk. “I know life is hard as a Seasonal. But just wait until you’re full-time permanent—if you get a full-time permanent.”

Soledad Diaz, the second-in-command, smiled and frowned at the same time. She was more muscled than Chuntao, with stick-straight posture and hair pulled tightly away from her face. It was Soledad who had hired her—or more accurately, had taken a chance on her—and now here she was, with the rest of her cohort, starting her six-month spring trial as a Seasonal Park Ranger. She wanted to make Soledad proud and suspected—or did she just hope?—that Soledad wanted her to succeed. “Look. I know Dispatch can be painful...” said Soledad. “But it’s better than Search and Rescue.”

“Is it ever,” said Chief, slurping from his coffee. He was known to suck down caffeine at all times of the day and night, as if aiming for vigilance even in his dreams. “And it sure as hell is better than Retrieval.”

“He’s right,” said Soledad. “No one wants to do Retrieval. And when it’s your turn on S.A.R., you’ll be counting on whoever’s at Dispatch to not be an idiot.”

“Own your own,” said Chief. “Fulfill your duties, respect the Park. If all the Visitors did that, we could all be playing Parcheesi right now.”

Back at Wilgus State Park, in Vermont, Chuntao’s Ranger job had been much simpler. The Visitors were shy high-schoolers seeking secluded places to make out, or wrinkly old people who were shuttled from nursing homes and slept in the heated yurts. They were wholesome couples with babies, who kept stopping on the trails to change diapers on a rock. They were road warriors in pop-up trailers, who shuddered at the concept of a permanent address, ever roving across America, not wasting their money on motels. They were giant families from Mexico and India who rented three adjacent campsites—erecting every tent and tarp and folding table they could borrow—to throw birthday parties for their aging matriarchs. These Visitors were poor, they were cautious, and they had to get back to work on Monday. Once in a while, Chuntao would saunter to their campsites, requesting that they turn down their radios or stop squirting gasoline on their fires, or she’d remind the high-schoolers hurriedly zipping their jeans that tick season was in full swing. Even the alcoholics and the addicts

didn't give her too much trouble, only leaving their tents to replenish their water jugs at the Ranger Station. "Barry, what did I say?" she'd scold, smelling the liquory breath. "No booze allowed in the Park. And next time, I'll mean it." Chuntao knew these Visitors. She found them pleasantly boring. They were inward; they didn't bother people. All they wanted—like her—was to carve for themselves a little space in the wilderness.

But Glacier drew the honeymooners. Couples armed with fresh wedding cash and needing "epic" photos to post about their love. Young lawyers and stock traders planning grand proposals to their girlfriends. Thirty-person groups of Outward Bounders, traveling in a herd and clogging the pit toilets wherever they stopped to rest. There were Glampers, faces smeared with mascara, wandering into the Ranger Station and requesting fresh pillows. Dudes with GoPro's strapped to their foreheads, demanding lithium batteries—*a 3.0 volt, if you have it, though 3.6 is preferable*. They wanted FitBit straps, they wanted the Wi-Fi password, they wanted Gu and bottles of Gatorade. They wanted Gatorade alternatives, rendered from organic kiwis and containing no high-fructose corn syrup. They needed mirrors. They needed USB cables. They complained of the existence of bugs. There were no big Mexican families, no big Indian families. Black and Asian hikers were as rare a sighting as the Eastern Towhee. Here Visitors wanted dramatic photos of themselves pretending to dangle from cliffs, pretending to drown in river rapids, pretending to get mauled by the moose antlers mounted in the Visitor's Center. Close-ups of grizzly bears. Action shots of each other mid-air, jumping over a vast and bottomless abyss.

"If they do something stupid, write it down," said Chief. "If they're hiking naked, write it down. If they're setting their poop on fire, write it down. If they tried wearing a rattlesnake, write it down."

"Wearing?" said Chuntao. "Rattlesnake?"

"We've seen it all. Believe me." Soledad concentrated on pulling a piece of lint from her shoulder.

"Don't forget the demographics," said Chief. "We prioritize children and old folks. But if you're healthy, you're not youngish or oldish, and your ex isn't trying to throw you off a waterfall, then we're not coming to help you." Chief's face reddened, his eyes trained on something

beyond her, as if speaking not to her but to some Visitor of times past. “No Ranger, no medics, no nobody. And this line we shall maintain, no matter how much you’re freaking out.”

“And good god, do people freak out,” said Soledad.

Chuntao eased her glasses back on, turning to behold the squat metal box of the Dispatch radio. *It’s only a radio*, she told herself—two dust-coated speakers with a dent in the protruding microphone, like equipment passed over at a yard sale, dotted with knobs and rows of strange lights, and all so harmless when it was quiet. Suddenly, Chuntao felt uncomfortable in her own clothes. The pants of her uniform were too long, so that she had to roll up their mud-encrusted hems. The shirt—too baggy in even the extra-small—she’d safety-pinned at her waist. She was dark-skinned for a Chinese girl, as her mother often commented, and when Chuntao looked down at her sleeve, she thought herself the same color as the uniform. The classic Stetson hat, conversely, wasn’t made for a woman with thick, long hair. Chuntao pushed it back down, but it only rose back up. The pin behind the metal Ranger badge bit into her bra.

Outside, the mountains loomed with stupefying beauty—their tops whipped with permanent snow, then descending to jagged rock and a thick carpet of valley pines. Chuntao wished she was hiking, or studying nests—breathing that fresh alpine air that she came here for. But here she sat, dreading when the radio might chirp and growl, like a sleeping wolf waking to bite.

“As you know,” said Chief, “our S.A.R. crew is tiny. Our S.A.R. crew is us. And we’re not exactly feeling the ‘steadfast commitment to protect our natural spaces’ from Congress these days. So we have to conserve our time and energy for the Visitors who truly need rescuing. And we’re very good at rescuing.”

“Eighty-nine people last year,” Soledad nodded. She pointed to a flowering lemon tree behind her, adorned with shiny white bows. “Got that for pulling a toddler from a mid-season brush fire.”

“And this,” said Chief, rolling up his sleeve, “was from rescuing a stroke victim with eighteen grandchildren.” The scar stretched from wrist to elbow, snaking through his skin like a parched river.

Chuntao leaned in to see it. “Holy crap. That’s incredible.”

“It’s nothing,” said Chief, rolling back the sleeve. “It’s our duty. We would do it over and over, to save the Visitors who are truly in need.”

“That’s why you’re here,” Soledad smiled, hopefully. “We need more young guns like you.”

Over the years, the Rangers had developed a code. Or rather, in the words of Chief, “an accentuated enforcement of existing triage guidelines.”

“Your job on Dispatch is to categorize all calls into four basic groups,” said Soledad. “The most important are the A.N.R.’s.” This, she explained, stood for Actually Needs Rescuing. “You’ll write these ones on the pink tickets. Nice and bright, so we can grab them immediately.” She handed Chuntao, with a gesture of discretion, a single sheet of paper.

They were code definitions. Not printed on NPS letterhead, but instead written by hand. Clearly by fellow Rangers as a kind of secret shorthand. Chuntao studied it:

*A.N.R. (Actually Needs Rescuing)*

*A Visitor who seeks help and is in imminent danger.*

*A Visitor who cannot seek help (due to medical incapacity, severe weather conditions, etc.) and is in imminent danger.*

*P.I.T.A. (Pain in the Ass)*

*A Visitor who does not seek help (due to naïveté, pride, embarrassment, desire for danger, etc.) and is in imminent danger.*

*All Fine*

*A Visitor who does not seek help and is NOT in imminent danger.*

*Code W*

*A Visitor who seeks help [often emphatically], but is NOT in imminent danger.*

This last definition intrigued her. “Code W?” said Chuntao. “What’s that?”

“The worst kind of all,” said Soledad.

“A wimp,” said Chief.

“Ouch,” said Chuntao. “That’s harsh.”

“It is,” said Chief. “But remember that there’s nothing *actually*

wrong with a Code Wimp. He's not in danger—he's just scared. And we have to prioritize—there are A.N.R's to save. We've got septic systems to unclog. We've got trails to restore. Not to mention, you know, protecting the actual wildlife. The stuff we actually enjoy."

"Believe me," said Soledad. "Code W's are more trouble than they're worth."

"Code W's will beg and plead," said Chief. "They'll weep. They'll scream. They'll manipulate. They *feel* real fear and danger, so there's no lengths to which they won't go. They'll threaten to sue you. They *will* sue you. They don't care if they endanger you too." Chief folded his arms. "If you let Code W's walk all over you, you won't last long in this Park. Code W's are the reason you're getting two hours of sleep a night. Code W's are the reason you have to leave birthdays and holiday parties. Code W's are the reason your marriage is falling apart." He looked away, shyly. "Whatever. You know what I mean."

"But your Visitor numbers are exponential," said Chuntao. "Can't the government just give you more cash?"

"Who do you think we are? Yosemite?" Soledad raised her arms. "The Grand Freaking Canyon?"

"Lovers' Point seems the preferred locale for Code W's to endanger themselves," Chief explained. "People hike up there, they party, they drink their craft beers, they propose to each other, they get their sunset photos... But guess what? They forget that they have to get themselves back down. In total darkness. On the side of a cliff. On a trail that's no wider than you." He pointed his eyes at her waist, in a gesture she recognized—white people were always telling Chuntao that she was small.

"We warn them, over and over. Last winter we posted those big reflective signs. But apparently, they don't have eyes. Or ears. Or a brain."

"And what can we do? It's Lovers' Point!" said Chief. "We could close it, but there goes half our revenue. There goes half our jobs. And besides—those hikers *can* get back down, if they just concentrate. Fear is their only real problem. But it's as if nobody told them that they could do hard things."

Chuntao blinked at the sheet, trying to make sense of it, but the rules all seemed so ruthless. She couldn't imagine enforcing them at all.

"But what about that call this morning, from the hiker who'd

forgotten his ice boots?” The young man’s voice, high and choppy with worry, had scratched inside her ears. Chuntao had felt her whole body itch, as if wanting to run and help him right then. “He was on Mount Siyeh, super-distressed. He really sounded in danger...”

“But was he actually in danger?” said Chief.

She considered this. The man confirmed that he had plenty of water, and food. His clothes were dry. But he was nearly crying into the phone, describing the ice-slicked rockface. “He was definitely unhappy,” said Chuntao.

“Was he alone?”

“He was with his brother.”

Chief straightened. “Then, he’s fine.”

“Or fine enough,” said Soledad. “That’s no pink ticket.”

Chuntao turned to the window, her stomach dropping. How could she possibly say no to someone so frightened? Outside, the mountains withdrew into a quiet, close-lipped fog.

“Remember,” said Chief, “if it’s dangerous for them, it’s dangerous for us. You want to climb up a cliff in the middle of the night, getting pelted by wind and hail?”

“With bears around?” said Soledad. “And falling branches? Falling rocks?”

“Well, no...”

“Exactly,” said Chief. He pointed to a line of portraits on the wall: smiling Rangers, against blue backgrounds, peering out from under their Stetsons. “That one’s Terry. Beside her is Sullivan, and his partner, Hamburg, to the right.” Chief bit his lip. For a man who chattered constantly, he was suddenly unable to speak. Finally, he uttered quietly, “We cannot emphasize enough how important it is to be prudent.”

“Prudent indeed. And respect the Park.” Soledad’s eyes were now on the floor.

“It wasn’t Mother Nature who took our colleagues,” said Chief. “Mother Nature is just doing her thing. It is up to our species to respect her. I’ll leave it at that.”

He paused. Then he folded his arms across his body, as if to hug himself.

“Lastly, and no matter what,” said Chief, “none of this discussion leaves this room. This stays between you and the other Seasonals and us. No one else. When you encounter a Visitor, behave as if all is

rainbows. Act welcoming, act gracious. Especially on the Nature Walks and whatnot. You're a—what does Management call it?"

"A facilitator of astonishment," said Soledad.

"Right. Ha." Chief rolled his eyes. "You're a facilitator of astonishment. Creating a 'Visitor's Bridge' between the earth and the divine, blah blah blah."

"Never veer from your duty," said Soledad, "and never, ever lose your cool. Even when a Visitor is being a total asswipe."

"You smile like this." Chief pointed to his face, raising the corners of his mouth into a stiff, manic grin.

"Like this," said Chuntao, spreading the tight muscles of her face.

But two weeks later came a mid-April thunderstorm, and a flash flood down in Keyhole Canyon. This was actually two deaths, but Chief explained that, in the Accidents and Incidents logbook, they should be grouped as a single incident. "Not an 'Accident,'" he instructed. There was nothing accidental about floods, he said, as sudden as they could be, because the Rangers had posted bright red warnings at every trailhead, and offered safety talks at the Visitor's Center that nobody signed up for. For that matter, almost no calamity in the Park was ever truly an accident. What they were, Chief explained, were "unforeseeable incidents."

One incident, two deaths. That such a thing could happen struck Chuntao as a revelation, and scared her.

"Unpreparedness, is what it is," said Soledad. "Some Visitors have a '911' mentality. If there isn't some flashing sign or a guardrail, they assume that the area is perfectly safe. They'll teeter on a crumbling cliff's edge. They'll wander off-trail, convinced that they'll find signage to point them back. They seem to imagine—if something bad happens—that they can just call us and someone will save them."

"Is it just me, or is it getting worse?" Chuntao flipped the logbook, scanning the growing entries.

"Indeed," said Chief, sipping his coffee. "More mountains, more problems."

"Plus, the glaciers are melting," said Soledad. "Everyone wants to catch a glimpse before they're gone for good."

Eighty years ago, Chuntao knew, there were 125 glaciers in the Park.

Now they were down to 25. And in fifteen years, there would be exactly zero. “What will you even call this place?” she said. “Just ‘National Park’? ‘Formerly with Glaciers?’”

“Yeah, we put out that press release a few years ago, to warn the public about their impact on the glaciers, but it seemed to have the opposite effect.” Three and a half million Visitors came last year; when Chief started there were half as many.

Soon Chuntao feared the Dispatch shift. She’d always hated saying no, worried that the requesting friend or boss would think her selfish or unwilling to meet another person’s needs. “So polite you are,” her fifth-grade teacher had once said, smiling proudly. “Like a little geisha.” Chuntao’s cheeks burned as the woman said it—should she feel flattered? Ashamed? What was a geisha anyhow? All she could do was swallow and nod. Now saying no seemed not only unpleasant but impossible, as she listened to Visitors insist that their lives were in danger. She asked Soledad if she could do an extra Nature Walk instead, or clean the fire rings out past Grinnell Basin, a job that nobody wanted to do. She even volunteered to gather the backcountry poop, which meant hiking off-trail for three days and stuffing the dried-up, unburied mounds into PVC pipes, which leaked stinky dust across her shoulders the whole hike back.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” said Soledad, looking Chuntao squarely in the eyes. “If you want to be an NPS Ranger, Wong, you have to learn this stuff. You have to learn and accept this line—between who needs saving and who does not. You must get comfortable with *not* saving. It’s the hardest lesson—I get it. But it’s also the most important.”

So Chuntao tried again. Of course she could learn this lesson. She was good at learning lessons! She’d already memorized the Park birds and half the species of fungi. And all this in her spare time, with a flashlight and book in the bunkhouse. But the next week, when Soledad checked her progress, Chuntao’s tickets had turned out the same.

“Are you serious?” said Soledad, fanning them on the desk. They looked like somebody’s art project, all pieces of the same thing. Pink ticket. Pink ticket. Pink ticket.

“I’m sorry,” said Chuntao. “But the Visitors sounded so scared. That one, there—she was even crying.”

Soledad put her hands on her hips. “Ranger Wong, I don’t have time to go reevaluating all your tickets. This is what Dispatch triage is *for*.

Now tell me, straight up.” She pointed to a pink slip at random. “Is this an A.N.R.? Is this *actually* actually needing rescue?”

Chuntao blinked. “I think so,” she said. “I mean, this one wanted a helicopter...”

“They all want helicopters!”

Chuntao squeezed her hands in her lap, knowing it was true.

Soledad sighed, exasperated. “Wong, you need to learn this,” she said. “If you don’t, you can’t start the S.A.R. training. You won’t learn Mountain Rescue, and you sure as hell won’t learn Water Rescue.” She sighed, bit her lip. “Look, we really care about you. I was so excited to hire you and Joshua especially. There aren’t—” She paused, glancing around her. Her voice lowered. “There aren’t very many of us here, as I’m sure you can see. And for people like us, this is more than just learning a policy. It’s about recognizing entitlement. About separating someone’s wants from their needs. And—most importantly—saying no to the people we’re used to deferring to.” Soledad straightened and rose her voice back to normal, as if Chief himself had just entered the room. “Bottom line? if you don’t internalize these policies, you won’t make it past Seasonal. Chief won’t have it, and neither will Management. You won’t get rehired, not even for just one season.”

Chuntao gulped. It was as if Soledad had thrown a spear through her heart.

Soledad shuddered, as if shaking off her own discomfort. “I’m sorry to be so blunt,” she said. “I say it because I think—if you can master this—you could be a good Ranger. But there’s some sort of mental block right now. So get beyond it. Own your own, as we always say.”

“Own my own,” said Chuntao. “I will try.”

That evening, after her shift, Chuntao dragged her heavy legs back toward the bunkhouses. Her boots were dry and spewing dust from their cracks. The sun was setting, drenching the canyon with its pink and orange innards. This place was undoubtedly beautiful. So beautiful it made her angry.

Joshua, a fellow Seasonal, came jogging up beside her. “You look terrible,” he said, eyeing her bent posture. “You on trail maintenance?” Chuntao lied that yeah, trail maintenance sure was brutal. He frowned with concern, and asked if she was going to the Ranger party that

night. It was a shindig that Chief liked to throw midseason—a bonfire, some beers. To congratulate them on their hard work in the middle of a grueling season.

“Maybe later...” said Chuntao. All she wanted was to hide in the Female Bunkhouse, wash her socks and quick-dry underwear, and hang-dry them over the shower rod without anybody bothering her.

“Come relax with us,” said Joshua, smiling as he left. “You deserve it.” She didn’t know how he stayed so chipper, especially since he seemed to be the only black Seasonal—or Ranger for that matter—in the entire Park. It must have been exhausting for him, and even frightening at times, and yet Joshua worked with a determined buoyancy that Chuntao could not comprehend. She envied him for that—that he had found some source of strength that she was only beginning to grasp for.

She walked far enough up the trail, to the spot where she could turn on her cell phone and call her mother.

“Dumpling!” came her mother’s voice, lit up with delight. Behind it, the low murmur of the television. “Sui!” she called to her husband. “Turn that off! It’s Chuntao!” She turned back to her daughter. “How are you?”

Her earnest, pleasant question made Chuntao start to cry.

“Oh, no, dumpling,” said her mother. The television went quiet. “Tell me. What is wrong.”

“I’m not sure I’m cut out for this,” said Chuntao. The tears sliding down her cheeks felt so warm, and she remembered how cold she was.

The phone crackled and revealed the voice of her father, who had picked up in another room. “Sweetheart!” he said.

“You’re too loud,” said her mother.

“Sweetheart?”

“Move it away from your mouth. Farther.”

At this, Chuntao laughed. She sat on a rock, her butt instantly cold, and toyed with a dried leaf. Her parents deployed their eager questions, and she explained everything—the radio shifts, the falling deaths, the codes that she couldn’t parse or stomach, the long hours, her aching muscles, her lack of friends. Did she have friends? Joshua? The other Seasonals? She crushed the leaf into tiny, papery flakes. Everyone else seemed so... confident. It was hard, in her current state, to be friends with people like that.

“But this is your dream,” said Ma.

"I know, I know," she said. It was true. She'd wanted to be a real Park Ranger her whole life. But at this moment, she wished she had wanted to be something else—an expedition leader, or some biologist. Why couldn't she have been happy with life at Wilgus Forest? "I just feel so unprepared."

"Mind you," said her father. "Your Ma and I—we were also unprepared. We had years of that, in this country. That's the condition of being us. Surviving in our own wilderness—so few Chinese, and no one to help us, you know. Well, there *were* people to help us, but they didn't want to do that—they just wanted to eat our eggrolls and chow mein!" His voice was cheery, but Chuntao heard the pain trickling underneath—a quiet, constant drip that had been emerging since before she was born. So much hope they'd had for America, and yet unshakeable from so much disappointment. "But now look at us! Our daughter has made it to the Glacier National Park."

"Are there other Chinese there?" said her mother.

"No, not that I know of." This didn't bother her too much—she was used to being an endangered species. She liked hiking through the forest alone, imagining herself as a lone and legendary Sasquatch.

But her mother disagreed. "Appalling," she hissed.

"It's Montana," said her father. "What did you expect?"

"There's a chow mein joint at every truck stop," her mother said. "We're everywhere! The least they could do is hire some as park rangers."

"Well, they hired our girl," said her father, who didn't like to speak badly about Americans.

"Is it all men?" said her mother. "I worry. You, all alone in the forest like that..."

"I'm not alone. Not much," said Chuntao. "What's really eating me is all this...dying. I don't know if I can stomach it."

"Mind you," said her father. "We're familiar with death too." And she knew what he was describing—her grandparents dying before they could get home to Guangdong.

"You do what feels right," said her mother, after an awkward silence.

"Some people can be very convincing," said her father. "And they can also be wrong."

"What's that supposed to mean?" said her mother. "Other people can be atrocious. And they can also be right."

“True, true,” said her father. “You don’t know until you know.”

“Well, this is helpful,” said Chuntao. “I’m really glad I called.”

“Now, stop that,” said her mother. “We can give you all the advice in the world, but we’re not the ones who have to poop in a tube.”

“What your mother said,” said her father. “You do what feels right.”

The party was behind the patrol cabin, near the Visitor’s Center, where thirty young Rangers—everyone but Chuntao?—flocked after finishing their 21:00 quiet-time enforcements. The bonfire lit their faces in orange flickers, and their laughter echoed off the tall, surrounding pines. Into this circle Chuntao shyly crept. Mere hours earlier, Chief had dispatched an S.A.R. crew to Grinnell Valley, where they’d saved a young woman who’d been bitten by a prairie rattlesnake. Now the crew heated their hands by the fire, clinking bottles of beer, relieved in the gratitude of a job well done.

“Fellow Rangers,” said Chief, “I want to thank you all for working so hard. Especially during this very trying year.” He raised his bottle and turned it to Joshua, Chuntao, and the others. “And especially to our new recruits.”

“To our new recruits!” cried the others. Chuntao tried to smile, then glanced at Joshua. He was staring into the fire. His face, she realized, was somehow both proud and strained, strong and weary, exhausted and determined. It occurred to her that as a young black man, he’d probably had to spend his whole life learning how to navigate settings like these, where she’d only had to a little. She looked at Soledad, who gave her a weak, frowning nod.

“May you learn what it takes,” said Chief.

The Rangers nodded solemnly. “What it takes,” they murmured.

“And, as usual, I want to take a moment to raise one for Hamburg, Sullivan and—most recently—Terry.”

Nobody spoke. The clinking bottles and group murmurs went quiet. Somebody stretched his beer bottle over the fire, and dribbled out a small stream onto the logs, which hissed and bubbled in response.

Suddenly, a screeching sound came from Joshua’s hip. At his belt, his two-way radio blinked red in the darkness. He fiddled with its knobs and held it to his ear. “Um, guys?” he said, looking up, his eyebrows arching, amused. “There’s a check-in? From Dispatch? Hikers stranded at Lover’s Point...”

“Again?” someone said.

“Again,” said Joshua. “Sounds pretty standard to me.”

“We’re off duty!” laughed another.

“They’re fine,” said Chief, taking a sip of beer.

Chuntao felt her hand tremble around her sweating beer. “They’re clearly *not* fine,” came her voice. “They’re freaking out. And by the way, they’re human beings!” She squeezed the bottle to her lips, sucking down the bitter liquid. Had she really said that? So ridiculous! Her voice was too loud, too simpering—she sounded huffy and childish, there in the circle of Rangers. But what else could she say? She felt like the stranded Visitors, desperate for someone to hear.

The Rangers blinked at her. Then they eyed one another, slowly turning away, as if she were a stage act too embarrassing to watch. Soledad hurried over, whispering harshly, as if trying to shush her. “Wong, you *know* this readout,” she said. “It’s a Code you-know-what.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, crossing her arms, purposefully petulant, as if sharpening her voice would finally get it heard. “But this is whack—this Code W business. It just feels super-wrong.”

Chief peered intently at Chuntao, as if a rare insect was making its way across her face. “You know what, Wong? Why not. Let’s go check this out.” Chuntao could hardly register her surprise, as he turned to the circle and banged his wedding ring on his bottle. “Everybody! Come on. Grab up your coats.”

Soledad brought a winter hat, and pulled it under her Stetson. Chief brought a megaphone and a clipboard. From the patrol cabin they led Chuntao, Joshua, and the others trudging over gravel, gnats swarming in their headlamps. Chuntao’s breaths made white puffs in the night air, which she knew was growing colder as sun-baked heat drained from the desert rocks.

Finally, the group arrived at the base of Lover’s Point. Chuntao couldn’t see the cliff itself—only a tall, empty shape below the stars. “Hear that?” said Chief, turning his ear toward the cliff. The Seasonals stood still, trying not to disturb the gravel.

Chuntao could hear nothing. Only a creeping wind, disturbing the trees.

“Turn off your lamps,” said Chief. “You’ll hear better.” One by one they switched them off. The black air pressed against their eyelids. Chuntao breathed in. The hairs in her nose went stiff. Cold air blotted out her ears.

Then she heard it. Wispy cries, echoing faintly against the rocks.

Chuntao gasped. “Is that them?”

The sound stopped. Then it came again, more desperate. She could hear it was a voice, but not the words the voice was making. Like a ship blaring distress codes to no one who knew their meaning.

Soledad nodded. “That’s them.”

“Shhhhhh,” said Chief.

Chuntao raised her binoculars. But she didn’t know where to point them—all around was uninterrupted darkness. “I can’t see anything,” she whispered.

A screeching low note burst out beside her. It was Chief, lifting the megaphone to his mouth and pressing the button, where it screeched out a couple low notes before the amplified voice barged through. “ARE...YOU...INJURED,” he yelled. Like a statement.

There was a silence. Then came a few muted, unintelligible yells.

“What was that?” said Soledad harshly.

“I don’t know,” said Chief, clearing his throat and raising the megaphone again. “ARE...” he said again. “YOU... INJURED...”

A long pause. And then came the response. “NO!”

“Good,” said Soledad, under her breath. She seemed to shudder with relief. “They don’t sound old. And I don’t hear any children...”

“HELP!” came the voice. It was throaty and desperate—the voice of a man.

“Oh god,” said Chuntao.

“HELP US!” A woman this time, her voice curdling.

Chuntao started whimpering. She couldn’t help it. She thought she might cry. She turned on her headlamp.

“Now, listen,” said Soledad. Her hand, warm with assurance, gripped Chuntao’s arm. “They’ve probably just eaten.”

“And they’re near the V.C.,” said Chief, turning to face her. “Their car is probably right there, at the trailhead.”

“They’re yelling for us,” said Chuntao.

“Everybody yells,” said Soledad. “That doesn’t mean they need us.”

Look—do you see the lights?” She smiled, almost laughed with relief.

Chuntao lifted her binoculars and this time she could see it: four or five tiny pinpricks of light, bumbling along the cliff’s edge like fireflies. “They have their phone lights,” said Soledad. “That’s huge. As long as they go slowly...”

Chuntao imagined the hikers trying to ease their way down the cliffside, seeking the edge of the trail. Any moisture in the air would soon freeze on the rocks and make them slippery as ice. Soon the grizzly bears would emerge, making their way down the mountain to investigate campgrounds for food. If the hikers were smart—which apparently they weren’t—they’d sit their butts on the trail and feel the rock with their fingers, inching down the mountain for as long as it took.

“We should help them,” said Chuntao. “They’ve probably been drinking...”

“We’ve been drinking,” said Soledad.

“No alcohol in the Park, we always say. They shouldn’t have done that.” Chief bit his lip. “They shouldn’t have gone up there in the first place. But what can you do? If it’s dangerous for them, it’s dangerous for us.”

“Look, Chuntao,” said Soledad, peering earnestly into her eyes. “Let this be a lesson. This is how you spot a Code W. We’ve warned them a thousand times. They know we’re off duty. We’ve done all we *should* do, for their safety and ours. They just have to stay calm.”

“They just have to not be idiots,” said Chief.

“Help!” the voices cried.

“You’ve got this, buddy,” said Chief, speaking into the binoculars as if they were right next to him. “That’s it. That’s it. Come on. Nice and easy.” He pulled out a pen and clipboard. Slips of paper flapped in the night wind.

“What are you doing?” said Chuntao.

“When they get down here, all safe and sound,” he said, “you are going to fine them.”

“We’re going to what?” said Chuntao. But Chief was scribbling on the clipboard, and handing it to her with a pen.

“Violation of trail rules. No persons permitted on this trail one hour after sunset. That’ll be eighty dollars each. It’s awful, yes, but this is the only way they’ll learn. And stop getting themselves or someone else killed.”

Chuntao stared down at the papers.

“They’ll be angry,” he said. “They’ll probably swear at us. But you’ll have to hold your ground. I’ll be right here.”

They were some sort of carbon paper forms, layered with white and pink and yellow sheets, a grid of lines and checkboxes and black letters stamped on top. She tried to read it, but she couldn’t because the papers, in her hand, were shaking.

“HELP!” came the voices. “SOMEBODY! PLEASE HELP!”

And with that, Chuntao couldn’t stop herself. She ran, her legs cycling forward, sprinting toward the mountain.

She had no equipment, no ropes, no plan of any sort. Just the thin light of her headlamp, bobbing up and down with her steps.

“Jesus, Wong!” called Chief.

“Get back here! Now!” screamed Soledad. But their voices grew fainter and fainter, under her panting breaths, and Chuntao knew that they wouldn’t be following to help.

Her boots hit pavement, and she followed along the hard surface of the road, praying no unseen branch or pothole would trip her. Finally, after what felt like many minutes, she spotted the reflective strips of an empty, parked Jeep. She’d come to the trailhead, at the base of the mountain, a skinny dirt trail snaking under a dark wall of trees. Chuntao stepped onto the trail, pointing her headlamp down, trying to avoid the poking, trippable rocks. Branches scraped at her jacket as she jogged upward. Cobwebs wiped themselves over her face as she ran, clinging invisibly to her lips.

She could hear the voices, now above her, growing nearer. “HELP!” they cried. “SOMEBODY!”

“I’M!” Chuntao shouted, between breaths. “COMING!”

She turned a corner on the trail and saw a woman. The woman was sitting on the side of the trail, hugging one knee, barefoot except for a flip-flop dangling from one toe. *She’s sprained her ankle*, thought Chuntao. She was pony-tailed, college-aged, clad in only thin yoga pants and a strappy white tank top. She was shivering visibly—from cold, or fear, or both.

“I’m an NPS Ranger!” cried Chuntao, scrambling up to meet her. “I’m here!”

The woman raised her arm to her eyes, squinting into the light. “Oh my god,” came her voice, which sounded like it had been crying.

Chuntao scrambled to her, aiming her headlamp at the woman’s ankle. “Let me see it,” she said, kneeling down. Close up, under the harsh light, the joint was white as a ghost. Gently, Chuntao took the woman’s bare foot in her hands. It was cold as ice—like something dead, or from the bottom of the sea. Tiny hairs on the toes poked up stiffly in the freezing air.

“Where does it hurt?”

“Take us home...” sobbed the woman.

“Where does it *hurt*,” Chuntao repeated. She eased the ankle to one side, feeling for the wetness of blood, or the misshapen bend of a broken bone. Chuntao secured the woman’s heel in her hand, leaning it the other way, and bent her face in close, searching for dark bruises, or the warm mounds of rapid swelling.

But there was nothing. Just a cold, damp, perfectly healthy ankle. The woman was fine. “I don’t understand,” said Chuntao. “Where... where are you hurt?”

“Everywhere,” said the woman. She was college-aged, yes, but her small, helpless voice made her sound like a child. “Just please—just take us back down.”

“Everywhere...” Chuntao examined the foot more urgently now, twisting it to find some splinter, some cut, some insect bite—*any* source of bodily pain. Her arms felt strange, working frantically in the dark—as if hoping, with new desperation, to find the real danger she had come to relieve.

“Ow,” said the woman. “You’re hurting me.”

“Me?” said Chuntao. “I’m...hurting you?”

The woman wouldn’t look at Chuntao—only at something beyond her, or through her, as if searching for someone more adequate. “Where’s your gear?” said the woman, her voice breaking. She started to cry. “Didn’t you bring a stretcher or something? And where is your *crew*? How are *you* supposed to save us, all by yourself?”

Chuntao dropped her arms, letting them collapse on the wet forest floor. She was furious. She wanted to feel relieved, finally knowing the woman was safe, but instead her skin felt hot and crawling with biting ants. Despite the black night, Chuntao felt, somehow, that she could finally see the edges of the ferns, and tiny circles of moonlight gleaming

off the wet stones of the trail. She needed to get back. Get away from these ridiculous people. What the hell was the matter with this woman? Why was she sobbing like that? What exactly was so damn dire?

Chuntao raised her head from the ground, and stared into the woman's terrified eyes. "I'm not going to save you," she said. "You're fine. You're just scared. Get ahold of yourself, why don't you."

Just then, she heard a forceful rustling from up the trail. Heavy boots, stomping hurriedly over leaves. A figure came hurtling through the dark. It was a man, running toward them, maniacally downhill.

"Stop!" yelled Chuntao. "NPS Ranger! Present!"

But the man kept tumbling toward her, blind and gaining speed, like a truck whose brakes had failed. Couldn't he see her? Couldn't he stop? Cracking twigs and pebbles spit themselves into her eyes, and Chuntao felt her forearm snap.

"Easy does it," said Soledad, easing Chuntao's elbow into a sling. Pain shimmered up her elbow like diamonds, and she bit hard on her lip. They were back at the patrol cabin, Chuntao lying in a twin-size bed, Soledad arranging bottles of medication on the nightstand. She barely remembered all that happened—Chief calling the medics from Kalispell, her fellow Rangers carrying her back down the mountain on a stretcher. She didn't see the woman hiker, didn't meet the man who'd stomped on her radius. Chief and Soledad, thankfully, refused to carry either down, only letting them trail behind the medics while ignoring their complaints completely. Now it was late, and no one had slept, but Soledad's eyebrows seemed permanently bent with worry. Chief paced about the room, his cheeks flushed.

"What did I say?" he barked.

"I'm sorry..." said Chuntao, her chest heavy. She really, truly, was sorry.

"I understand that you want to help people. But this time, that wasn't your job."

Chuntao felt the mattress sink on one side. It was Soledad, sitting on the bed's edge. "We get it. You were scared. You got bit by the same Code W logic..."

Chief stopped and knelt on the floor, so that his face was level with hers. From the corner of her eye Chuntao felt a tear squeeze out, sliding

down her cheek and dampening the fabric below. She had never seen Chief so up close before—his forehead wrinkled with worry, reminding her of her parents.

“I want you to remember this,” said Chief. “That moment that you ran up there, when Soledad and I didn’t follow you. How it feels to be completely on your own. What would you have done if we hadn’t come for you? That’s what every Visitor—and every Ranger—must ask before we step on those trails.”

“I can’t believe they were fine,” said Chuntao, choking back tears. “They were utterly, completely fine.”

“Oh, sweetie,” said Soledad, seemingly unable to help herself. She wrapped her arm delicately around Chuntao’s sling.

“They’re animals,” said Chief, shaking his head. “They mauled you.”

“We’ve all been there,” said Soledad.

Chief started rolling up the leg of his pants. “I didn’t show you this one.” He pulled down his sock to reveal a wide, sunken scar. In the lamplight, the hairless skin shone unnaturally. “Got this from my first Code W. He practically attacked me as I was turning around...”

“That’s awful,” said Chuntao.

“Not as bad as Terry,” said Soledad.

“Not at all,” said Chief. “We three are lucky.”

Soledad leaned over toward the nightstand and grabbed an open bottle of beer. “You know what I felt, when I was stranded in the desert with mine? Not, ‘I can’t believe I’m going to die,’ but, ‘I can’t believe I’m going to die with these idiots.’”

And Chuntao chuckled, in spite of herself. Chief laughed too. Her chest opened, her face went warm with relief. It felt wonderful to belong in this family of good people. Soon all of them were laughing, stomachs aching, wiping at their tears, huddling like cubs in the tiny cabin built just for them.

“Have a sip,” said Soledad, offering Chuntao her beer. “You deserve it.”

Chuntao wanted to love her job. She wanted to love her species. But lying here, her swollen fingers wrapped in plaster, she didn’t feel like part of the species. How could they be so unthinking? Hungry for danger, hungry for disaster? It was a desire that lived in only two kinds of people: those who had only known both and those who had never known either.

She took hold of the bottle, its cold wetness pleasing to the touch.  
She drank, the liquid sliding warm and prickly down her throat.  
“Congratulations,” said Chief. “You’re a real Ranger now.”

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