

# W is for Waiting

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**A/N: Thanks to Kelmin who provided the necessary stimulus that helped me realize that I COULD, in fact, salvage the bizarre oddity of fragments that somehow ended up as 'Q' (never edit two different files unknowingly and then post one without checking. oy vey!). Fortunately, with some re-measuring and add'l "sewing" the shredded strands of 'Q' were rebuilt into 'W'...**

Captain Stanley sat at the kitchen table with a towel-laden plate nearby. He was reading the latest HQ Newsletter and waiting for his crew to filter in. Fortunately, his wait was minimal and they ended up all sauntering in together. "Hey fellas, wait'll you hear this."

"What is it, Cap?" Lopez asked, starting a new pot of coffee.

"Oh, thanks, Marco. You know how they started putting in this new Trivia section in the newsletter?"

"What newsletter is that?" Johnny peered over Cap's shoulder.

"The HQ newsletter," he shook the issue he held in the air.

"They have a trivia section?" Chet started gathering the coffee mugs out of the cupboard.

"You guys don't ever read these, do you?" Cap looked around suspiciously.

"Oh. We do, Cap. All the time," Chet assured him.

"Oh yeah. All the time," Roy affirmed.

"We read the jobs section," Johnny quipped, chuckling.

Cap threw him a glance. "Uh huh. Alright. Who was featured in the last issue?"

Four pairs of firefighter eyes looked around at each other. "No one," Stoker answered. "The lead feature was about those new air-pump anti-shock pants they're starting to distribute to the paramedic teams".

"No kiddin'!" Gage said.

Cap slapped the table and pointed at Stoker. "That's exactly right. You boys better be extra nice to Stoker 'cause he just saved you all from latrine duty."

"Cap! That's not fair!" Chet whined.

"Yeah, I know. I was just kidding. He does, however, get the last fresh blueberry muffin my wife made this morning. Dig in, Mike."

"Thanks, Cap," he said, reaching underneath the towel to grab the still-warm muffin. "This is good, Cap. Thank Missus Cap."

"I will. As I was saying, in the trivia section of this *fascinating* department newsletter which I know you will all read from now on –" – he noted the vigorous nods around the table – "-it mentions that the longest gap between shifts, between 8 am and 8 pm, was 2 hours and 17 minutes. On C-shift. Right here at this very station."

"No way!" Chet exclaimed, stepping over to see the mention for himself.

"For either vehicle in the station?" Roy asked.

"I'd assume so," Stanley read it over. "It doesn't explicitly say so, but it says 'station', so I'd hazard that's the correct assumption."

"Poor C-shift," Marco leaned against the counter, spinning a spoon in his hand.

"Whaddya mean 'poor C-shift'?" Gage complained.

"Can you imagine what Hookrader must've had them doing for *2 hours*?"

"Oh. Yeah..." Johnny deflated. That idea settled very uncomfortably in all of their minds and several of them physically shuddered at the thought.

"Anyway, HQ is having a contest. For this next quarter, whoever smashes that record gets one of those new fancy Mr. Coffee makers."

"Why would they give a coffee maker to a bunch of firefighters who aren't doing anything?" Chet wondered.

"Not a half-bad question, Chet," Cap answered. "But it is HQ. Dare we question our superiors."

"We *always* question our superiors," Johnny pointed out.

"Not as much as the *inferiors* are questioned," Cap pointedly looked at his underling.

"Oh. Yeah. Never thought about it that way, I guess."

"They're probably hoping the caffeine will keep them awake," Mike guessed.

"Cap, you don't really think the record can be broken do ya?" Chet wondered.

"Well, if it can happen once..." Hank shrugged.

"Between 8 am and 8 pm?"

"Yep."

"Any day of the week?"

"Right-O."

And that particular waiting period stopped when the klaxons sounded alerting them to report to the continuing brush fire in the canyon.

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"Roy! Johnny! Get cleaned up so I can put you two back in service," Cap ordered as a tired engine crew nearly melted off the rig.

"Yeahsureyabetch," Gage mumbled as he trudged behind his partner toward the shower.

While the Squad crew cleaned up, the Engine crew started in on dinner, but bickering quickly ensued about what was easiest to make. Cap finally ended the debate with a plaintive "Just throw a bunch of stuff in a pot and make a stew, for crying out loud!"

So they rummaged in the fridge, threw a bunch of stuff in a pot and let it simmer while they cleaned up the vehicles.

The Squad crew returned minutes later. Cap put them back in service and placed them on Culinary Duty, inviting them to 'finish throwing stuff in' while the rest of A-shift cleaned up.

Finally, with his crew and vehicles showered and shiny, again, they sat around the kitchen table staring at the steam rising from a pot of...whatever it was they'd made.

"Well, someone's gotta test it," Johnny complained, staring into the abyss of their meal.

"Well it ain't gonna be me," Chet countered against his grumbling belly.

"Those tones are gonna go off, gentlemen, and who knows how long it'll be before we ever eat again. Start dishing out or we're gonna starve to death," Cap ordered half-heartedly.

Everyone groaned but no one moved.

"What did you guys put in here, anyway?" Mike asked, slowly stirring the contents of the pot with the ladle.

Marco grabbed the ladle in annoyance and started serving. "Some onions, tomatoes, celery, potatoes and...I don't know a...bunch of other stuff. I woulda thrown a chicken in there, if we'd had any. Stupid rooster," he muttered.

"We put some of that left-over sausage from C-shift," Johnny pointed out.

Roy stared at the bowl Marco had just placed in front of him. "Celery? Not the single ones in the bin. They were wilted and a little moldy," Roy pointed out.

Five bowls found themselves being pushed away by their owners.

"I threw those away," Marco answered, setting down his own bowl. "I used the fresh ones in the bag."

Five bowls slid back to their owners.

"Here goes." Five pairs of eyes watched as Lopez dipped his spoon, cooled the contents with a few breaths then took a brave mouthful. A neutral look. A slight frown. Back to neutral. A raised eyebrow.

"Well?" Chet elbowed him.

"Who cares," Marco said. "It's food."

"He's not dead yet, I'm eating," Roy piped up and started in.

The kitchen erupted to life as six hungry firemen instantly dug in and almost couldn't believe they'd ever tasted anything so good.

But Captain Stanley stole a glance at his watch and a nervous tension descended on him as he remembered the department record of gaps between runs. *Damn it*, he realized. Now everytime they came back from a run he was gonna start counting. He couldn't keep doing that. However, considering the day they'd had... If there was ever gonna be a quiet shift, now was certainly the time. But it'd only been an hour. Surely, the tones were gonna sound –

Sure enough. Six chairs scraped back before the tones completed and six firemen stared at each other as they stood around the table, adrenaline keeping them hovering on the balls of their feet.

"Not us," Hank breathed in relief, his dashed hopes creeping steadily back. "Guess, we're all a little jumpy, huh?"

"A little?" Marco remarked, gaping at Chet hanging onto him and he shook him off his arm. "Do you mind? I need this arm to eat with."

"S okay, Marc. I'll feed ya."

"If it was ice cream, I'd say okay. Hot stew? I'll feed myself, *muchas gracias*."

"What, you don't trust me? My hands are steady." He held them out.

Stoker and Marco peered at the Irishman's none-too-steady mitts. "Yeah. Steady, like all your girlfriends," Mike quipped.

"Yeah. Okay. I see how it is around here."

"Fellas, can we just *eat*?" Cap asked wearily.

Six chairs scraped back to the table and the six firemen cautiously dug back into their meals, every klaxon from every station making them jump.

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Amid the pot clanging and dish clinking, Cap retreated to his office.

Some minutes after that came another knock on the office door.

"Yeah, Mike?"

"You got that new HQ newsletter, Cap?"

"Yeah, it's in that pile over there," he pointed to the desk behind him, then laid down the log report he was filling out. "Are you *that* bored, Stoker?"

"I think Captain Hookrader had the guys throw away all the new issues of everything and kept all the old ones, by mistake."

"Oh. Well that's a bummer."

"You're telling me. Mind if I read it in here?"

"Be my guest. Go ahead and post it on the board, when you're done. I'm finished with it. Chet watching one of his movies, again?"

"Yeah."

"John and Roy still on their 10-8 to Rampart?"

The guttural thrum of the Squad's engine rumbled in the bay, followed by both doors slamming shut. "Not anymore," Mike answered.

The two men settled in at their respective desks and were silent for several minutes while one read and the other wrote.

That rosy scene lasted about two minutes when Cap found the rest of his station piling into the office.

"Cap! You gotta do somethin' 'bout this. Marco and I were just watchin' our movie when—"

"No, *you* were watching *your* movie," Marco corrected.

"—these two jokers come back from Rampart and just change the channel on us, like we weren't even there!"

"You were rummaging in the fridge, Chet! How were we supposed to know you were still watchin'?"

"You could've asked!"

"Why would we ask if no one was watchin'—?"

"It was on a *commercial*, Gage—!"

"Well, then ya wouldn't have missed anything, wouldja!"

"Enough!" Captain Stanley, yelled. "Boy, with you guys causing this kind of a racket, no one can hear the—" He stopped short, exchanging a look with his engineer.

Mike snapped his eyes up to the clock – 19:27. *No. No...* His eyes narrowed as he calculated. He looked back at the newsletter, then back at the clock. *Yeah. Definitely no.*

"Hear the what, Cap?" Roy prodded.

"Nothing. Nevermind." Captain Stanley came to a decision. "Fellas, there's only one way to resolve this."

"Get rid of the TV?" Marco answered hopefully.

Cap eyed Stoker. "A knot-tying drill! C'mon, everybody."

"A knot-tying drill! Now?"

"My movie's on!"

"Why a knot-tying drill?"

"Is McConnike up his butt again?"

"I heard that."

"*All* of 'em?"

"In alphabetical order, gents."

"Us or the knots?"

"Both. C'mon. Get those lines out."

The crews grudgingly began gathering ropes for this odd turn of events in their evening, when Cap's voice halted them as they stood between the Engine and the Squad. "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Dammit, we can't start something now."

Groans erupted from the weary group and the ropes were dropped onto the ground in a heap.

"If we start something now, they're *really* gonna go off," Cap looked up at the speaker, his hands on his hips.

"Cap, what're you talking about—?" Roy began.

"Hold on," Chet said. "Is this about what I think it's about?"

"Don't say it, Chet," Mike warned.

"From the newsletter. You remember from this morning?"

"Chester B. Kelly, so help me, if you say one word..."

"I'm not gonna jinx it, Cap."

"Oh *that*?" Gage exclaimed. "Well how much longer till —"

"GAGE!"

"Alright, alright! Sheesh! I won't say, nothin'! I won't say nothin'!"

"Look, everyone just...stop moving," Cap ordered.

"Stop moving?" Roy asked incredulously.

"You know what I mean."

"I'm...afraid to," DeSoto muttered.

"OK, look, if we start something, we know they're gonna go off. So, if everyone just...quietly goes about their business, I think we'll be okay," Cap suggested.

"Cap! Do you really expect that Dispatch is gonna adhere to our, well, *your* superstitions and not bother us just because we're—?"

"GAGE!"

"Alright! Alright! Man, you guys are worse than the MBA."

"Remember now, nobody *start* anything," Cap ordered.

For the next several minutes, A-shift tiptoed throughout the station, paying extra care not to start anything. No ping-pong games, card games or even dessert was so much as thought as the men quietly and slowly scrambled about doing...almost nothing.

But the citizens of Los Angeles had other plans.

Less than two minutes to go before C-shift's record would have been smashed, the klaxons sounded and Sam's voice echoed loud and clear amid the shoe shuffling and vehicle door slamming at Station 51. *"Station 51. Unknown type rescue. 6852 Alhambra Road. 6-8-5-2 Alhambra Road. Cross street, Inverness. Time out: 19:57."*

"Ah *nuts!*" Captain Stanley cursed as he grabbed the mic at the call station. "Station 51, 10-4. KMG 365."

"How much longer did we have?" Lopez asked as he got into the jumpseat.

"Less than two minutes. Two minutes!" Cap grumped as both vehicles left the station.

"Two minutes!" Chet griped. "Aw, damn! We were *so* close!"

Half a minute later, the Engine's radio beeped. *"Station 51, cancel."*

"Station 51, 10-4."

Mike shut off the lights and sirens and turned Big Red around and headed back to the station, along with the Squad.

"Wait a minute. So what does this mean, Cap? Are we still in the running?"

"I have no idea, Kelly."

"We still got toned out," Mike pointed out.

"Well, yeah, I know, but we didn't go anywhere," Cap argued.

"I'm assuming the rules are run to run, not tone to tone," Chet said.

"I'd assume so, too, but I don't know if there's a way to find out."

"They may not have factored that in," Marco said.

"Maybe not. Well this is frustrating. Do you know what the odds are that we'll get this chance again?"

"I still think this doesn't count," Chet added.

"Frankly, I'm inclined to agree," Cap said.

Mike backed the Engine in next to the Squad.

"So what does this mean, Cap? We still in the running?" Johnny asked, sliding out of the Squad.

"I wish I knew. I'll call HQ tomorrow. Guess we'll have to wait for the next shift."

"I'm up for ice cream with whip cream," Johnny headed for the kitchen.

"No argument from me on that," Roy added.

"Amen," Marco followed.

And another day of waiting would have to wait for another day...

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