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Subject: Re: Winds of Change  
Posted by [Tikatu](#) on Sat, 28 Jul 2012 03:34:09 GMT  
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From: Tikatu Sent: 6/30/2007 1:14 PM

Wednesday, September 12, 2068, 3 p.m. on Tracy Island (Tuesday, September 11, 2068, five hours after take-off, somewhere over the Pacific, locally)

"China Airways flight 7002, Beijing to Santiago, what is your ETA?"

Cao Liang glanced over at the pilot, graying veteran Xu Cai, who sighed. She turned her head to glance at the communications officer, her companion for so many trans-Pacific flights.

"Please tell both Santiago and Beijing that we are on schedule."

"Yes, Captain." Liang gave the pilot a grave nod and turned back to the radio bank.

"Do you think both cities are asking?" queried Dou Cheng, the young co-pilot. He was new to the team, and although he had already made several flights with Cai and Liang, Cai still felt he was wet behind the ears.

"With what we are carrying within the fragile goods hold? Yes. Both will ask." Cai turned back to her instruments, then said, "Please ask Han Xiong how our most delicate passengers are faring."

"Yes, Captain," Cheng responded. He toggled a switch to change the frequency to an interior one, and clicked his microphone twice. "Han Xiong? The captain would like to know how the pandas are doing." As an afterthought, he added, "And their attendants, too."

Xiong, a good-looking flight attendant, answered the call. "I am about to descend to the hold with the attendants' meals. I will be able to tell you more when I am finished."

"Understood. Cheng out."

Xiong smiled at his co-worker, Na Shu Bai. "It seems the captain is anxious on this flight."

Na Shu shrugged, and pulled a tray of food from the warmer. "She has been taking care to make the flight smooth. I don't think we've hit even one pocket of turbulence so far."

"Watch," Xiong said with a chuckle. "Now that you've said it, it will happen."

"Here," Na said, handing him a tray, which he slid into a padded carrier. "You'd best go down to the hold and feed the pandas' attendants. I will start over the wings." She glanced up. "Mei and Shan have started with the forward section already."

"All right," Xiong replied. He closed the carrier and held it firmly as he opened a hatch across from the rear galley. "I will be back in a few minutes, then I can help."

Na nodded, and positioned the cart for the starboard aisle, then started rolling the cart down the port aisle. Xiong would do the starboard side when he returned.

Xiong carefully navigated the narrow stairs down to the fragile cargo hold. It was pressurized and climate controlled, made for handling animals, fragile plants, and the occasional odd bit of delicate technology, in any weather. Usually a cargo handler from the airline would be stationed here to keep an eye on things, but not this time. This time the two built-in seats were occupied by a husband and wife, Lang Zhen and Lang Jiao, both employees of the Beijing Zoo. The cargo, a pair of pandas, one male, one female, were a gift from China to Chile at a time when the two countries found themselves in a rather delicate diplomatic state. Because of the pandas' presence, no other animals were permitted to fly in this hold on this flight, though Xiong knew full well there were at least two Search and Rescue dogs on the main passenger deck.

The flight attendant had wrinkled his nose at the musky animal smell as he descended, but made sure his face was schooled into a pleasant expression by the time he reached the hold's floor. He found Jiao, the veterinarian of the pair, inside the large, well-ventilated boxes, checking the vital signs of her charges. Zhen was reading the flight magazine and looked up with a smile at Xiong's approach.

"Ah, dinner... or luncheon perhaps?" he asked as Xiong set up the side tray and swung it around in front of the trainer.

"Luncheon, if you go by Beijing time," Xiong replied with a smile. "Very late supper according to Santiago."

"Ah!" Zhen said as he opened the pre-cooked, pre-wrapped meal. "No matter. I am hungry."

"So am I," said Jiao. "But I must wash my hands first. I will return in a moment."

Xiong nodded, and placed her meal on the tray. "I will leave this here. I must return to the passenger deck. If you need anything..."

"I know," Zhen said, pointing to an intercom over his shoulder. "Just call."

Xiong smiled, then followed in Jiao's wake as she climbed to the deck to find the lavatory. He himself washed his hands in the galley, then started pushing his cart down to begin feeding the other passengers.

While Xiong was in the hold, Na began to distribute the meals she had warmed. A few people had requested special plates, and one of these was Hua Chen-Ramirez. She and her son, ten-year-old Diego, were returning from China after having been to her brother's wedding. It had been a joyful time, and a stressful one, too, as Hua was diabetic, and the meals cooked by her mother were not exactly conducive to a diabetic diet. Diego had insisted on a seat where he could watch the engines, though now, five hours into their flight, he'd lost interest and was instead reading one of the comic books he'd purchased in Beijing. It was in English, which Diego was learning in school, and he was working hard to pick out the words in the dialog balloons.

"Here you are, madam," Na said as she laid the meal tray in front of Hua. Diego already had his,

and was diligently eating, taking an occasional sip from his cup of soda.

"Thank you, miss," Hua replied with a smile. She tore off the protective cover. "This looks very tasty. I'm sure I will enjoy it."

"You are welcome," Na replied, still smiling as she moved on to the passengers on the other side.

The cabin was full of delicious smells, and people quieted as they were fed. Na emptied her cart and headed back to the galley for more trays and drinks. She glanced across the middle bank of seats. Xiong wasn't far behind her.

She had just gotten the cart into its locked position, ready for refilling, when the plane gave a mighty lurch, one that slammed Na into the galley's wall. People on the port side screamed, and one cried out, "The engine!"

to be continued...

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