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Subject: Re: Winds of Change  
Posted by [Tikatu](#) on Sat, 28 Jul 2012 03:52:00 GMT  
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From: Tikatu Sent: 6/30/2007 2:34 PM

The walk back to the hold access was harder than Cheng thought it would be. The flight attendants were all busy with the passengers, helping to mop up meals, and tending to injuries. He spoke with each one on the starboard side as he made his way back. Disentangling himself from the passengers was difficult at first; he couldn't remember how many times he said, "Sir/Madam, please sit down and buckle your restraint", to someone pleading or demanding to know what was happening. Then Cai began her series of announcements, and he found the going easier as people began to listen to her. He was surprised to find Na working on the starboard side instead of the port, where she could usually be found.

"Xiong's gone down to the hold," she told him when he asked. "Mei's helping me out on port while he checks on the pandas."

"That's where I'm heading, then I'll be going back up through the port aisle to check on the damage." He frowned as he noticed her favoring her left arm. "Are you hurt?"

She smiled wearily. "Just bruised, I think. It hurts, but..." She gazed out over the passenger, and shrugged with her right shoulder. "They're more important now."

"True, but make sure Xiong or Mei take a look at it soon," he directed. "I'll be back up shortly."

Na nodded, and Cheng went on his way.

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Diego and his mother looked up as Mei stopped by their row, a young man in uniform at her elbow. She smiled, and sketched a small bow. "Could I trouble you to stand up for a moment?" she asked, using Mandarin first. "Our co-pilot needs to ascertain the damage to the wing."

"Of course," Hua said, replying in the same tongue. She switched to Spanish. "Diego, come with me. This gentleman needs to see the wing."

"Yes, Mother," Diego said dutifully. He slid out into the aisle with his mother, and watched Cheng slip into his seat. Cheng frowned, and shook his head.

Diego cleared this throat and asked, "What is that stuff coming from the wings?"

Hua tried to shush him, but Cheng looked at her with a questioning glance and asked, "What did he say?"

"He asked what that liquid was that's coming from the wing," Hua translated.

Cheng was caught between telling the boy the truth, which would likely spark a panic among the

passengers, or a lie, which was uncomfortable for him personally, but might keep things calmer. "Hydraulic fluid," he said after a moment's hesitation. He ruffled Diego's hair. "Don't worry about it."

Hua translated again, then Diego, full of the things he had seen, said, "You should have seen the big ball of fire..."

Now, Hua shushed him more firmly. "Do not speak of it. This man is busy and must return to the cockpit."

Diego sighed heavily, and nodded. Cheng, though puzzled by the dialog, nonetheless realized that the mother was clamping down on the boy. He slid out of the seats and stood aside, letting the passengers return. "Thank you very much for your assistance," he said, giving them a little bow.

Mei moved in briefly. "Are you comfortable? Please fasten your restraints." When satisfied that the pair was settled, she ran interference for Cheng on his way back to the cockpit.

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Liang made a noise that caught Cai's ear, a sort of strangled sound born of frustration and something more. "Report, Liang."

"According to the computer, we're losing fuel at a rate which will make it impossible to make landfall."

Cai let that set in, blinking a bit. "Impossible? We cannot make it to an airstrip or land anywhere?"

Liang shook his head. "We will go down in the ocean."

The captain took a deep breath and began to swear, long and creatively. When she was finished, she asked, "Do you know what this will mean?"

"Yes, I do."

Their conversation was interrupted by Cheng's return. "Report," Cai instantly demanded.

"The pandas are well, and their keepers are shaken but unhurt. Xiong was already there when I arrived." Chang returned to his seat and fastened himself in.

"And the wing?"

Cheng made a face before turning his attention to the instrument panel. "Fuel is draining from a number of small holes in the bottom of the wing. Shrapnel must have hit the underside. It doesn't look bad from here."

Cai and Liang exchanged glances. "It is bad," Cai said bluntly. "We will not be able to make land."

Cheng looked up sharply. "No? Not at all?"

Liang shook his head, and Cheng turned to see him. "Not at all. We will have to take her down on the sea and pray we don't break up."

"We shouldn't do that, Liang," Cai said waving a hand. "This plane's built as solidly as the Fireflash. Two of them went down in one piece. And, as a result of the Fireflash's crash record, we have flotation devices."

"But night is falling," Cheng argued. "One misstep, and those flotation devices won't do any good."

"Plus we are far from the shipping lanes," Liang added. "It will take time for ships to find us, possibly too long."

"And there are the pandas," Cai said sourly. "If we take on water..."

The three crew members looked at each other, the Cai sighed. "Liang, to prevent an international incident, we need international help. Let Santiago and Beijing know, then call International Rescue."

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