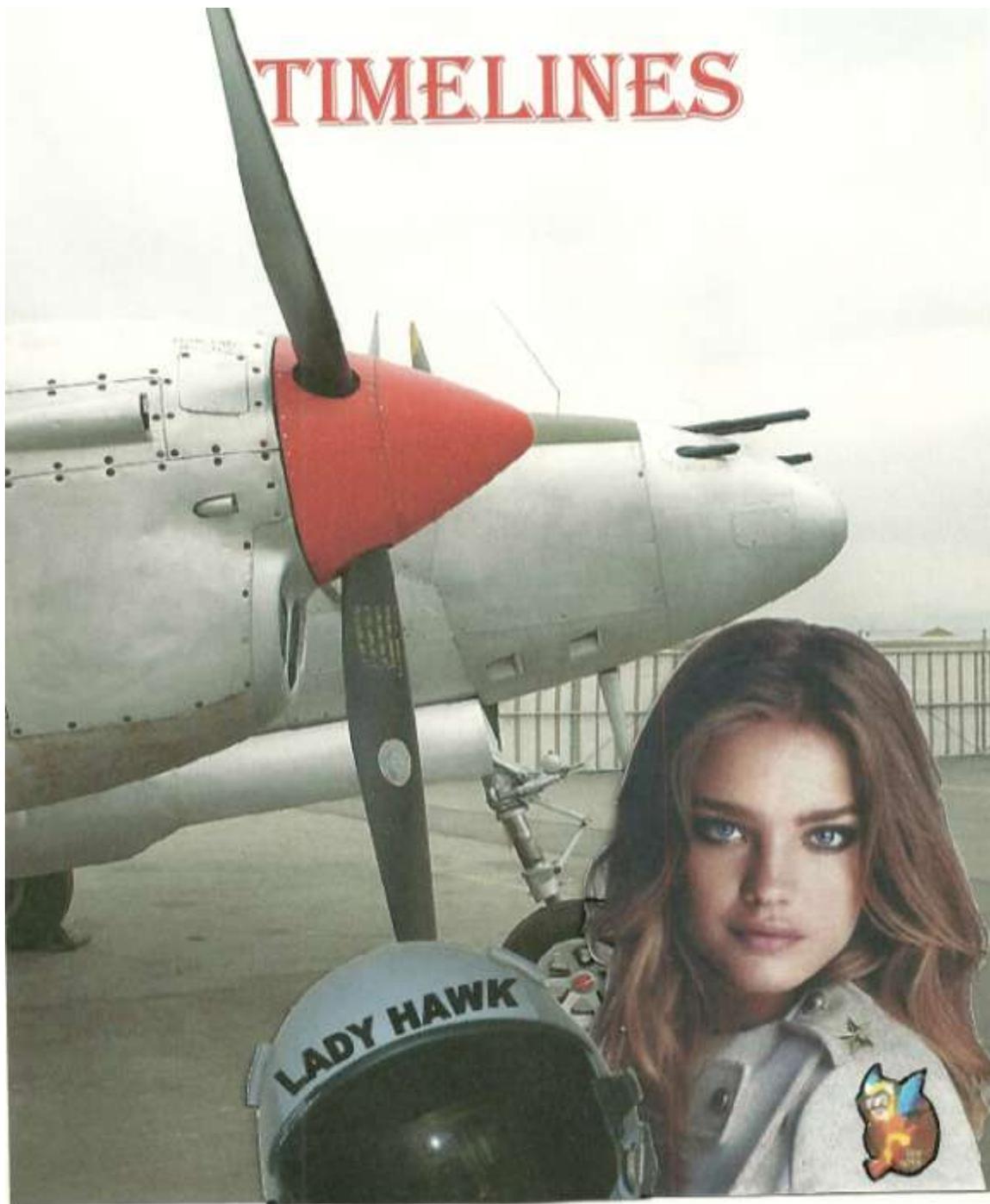


# TIMELINES



A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL  
BY  
MICHEL POULIN

# **TIMELINES**

**A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL**

**BY MICHEL POULIN**

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## **WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS**

**THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL EVENTS AND ONLY DESCRIBE ALTERNATE HISTORICAL SCENARIOS. RELIGION-RELATED EVENTS DEPICTED IN THIS NOVEL IN NO WAY REFLECT THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE AUTHOR.**

### **ABOUT THIS NOVEL**

This science-fiction novel is the fourth installment in a collection of five novels depicting the adventures through time of Nancy Laplante, a female Canadian war correspondent from the year 2015 and the chief of operations of the Time Patrol, an organization originating from the 34<sup>th</sup> Century. Those novels were written prior to the fictionalized events of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century depicted in them, thus should be treated as novels about alternate realities. The year in the dates shown in the headings are followed by the letters 'A', 'B' or 'C', denoting in which timeline the action is happening. Timeline 'A' is the original historical line, while Timeline 'B' is a parallel alternate history created accidentally by Nancy Laplante when she was transported against her will from 2012 to the year 1940 and changed history by her actions. Timeline 'C' is a second parallel alternate history created from 1941 'B' when enemies of Nancy tried to kill her and thus change history in their favor. The fifth novel in the collection, DESTINIES, will be published in 2013.

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## **CHAPTER 1 – SOUTH CHINA SEA**

**09:16 (Philippines Time )**

**Monday, December 7, 2015 ‘A’**

**Tugboat SAN MARINO, near Second Thomas Reef**

**Spratly Islands, South China Sea**

Captain Olivero Muñoz scanned again the western horizon with his binoculars as he stood on the bridge of his tugboat, feeling apprehensive. There had been bad blood for decades already between the Philippines and the Peoples’ Republic of China, or PRC, about the possession of the various small islands and reefs in the northern portion of the Spratly Islands. The Philippines were in fact not alone in this dispute, with Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam all claiming some or all of the Spratly Islands area, while the PRC claimed the whole of the South China Sea, including even waters that were inside the traditional 200 nautical miles limit of the Exclusive Economic Zone, or EEZ, of the countries bordering the South China Sea. All that was basically to control the rich resources of the region in fish and in potential hydrocarbon deposits under the seabed. Some shooting incidents had even occurred in the past because of the dispute, like when Vietnam had been violently thrown out of the Paracel Islands by the Communist Chinese in 1974, or when Chinese ships had fired on Vietnamese fishing boats in 2005. More recently, a Filipino Navy ship had exchanged fire less than a year ago with two Chinese patrol boats near the Scarborough Shoal, another disputed area of the Spratly Islands. In the case of the SAN MARINO, Muñoz knew that he had reasons to be anxious, as his ship was towing a big tanker barge towards an oil exploration platform of the Shell Philippines Exploration B.V., or SPEX, that was anchored near the Second Thomas Reef, known to Filipinos as the Ayugin Reef and to the Chinese as the Ren’ai Jiao Reef. That tanker barge was presently empty, but not for long if all went well on this trip. The SPEX had done its best to keep this a secret, but its platform had struck gold a few days ago, with all indications pointing to a huge oil field under the seabed near the Second Thomas Reef, which was itself situated less than 200 kilometers off the western coast of the Philippines’ Palawan Island, thus well inside the Filipino EEZ. The problem was that only a few kilometers away from the Second Thomas Reef was the Chinese-occupied Mischief Reef. The Chinese had been building and expanding there since

1995 an outpost that supposedly was only a shelter for passing Chinese fishermen but that was in reality much more like an artificial fortress island, complete with radars and military garrison. With the PRC insisting that the whole of the South China Sea was part of its territorial waters and with the growing aggressiveness of Chinese patrol ships, the eventual knowledge of a huge oil find in this area would certainly attract Chinese action of some kind. In view of the potential huge revenues at stake, the Filipino government had lent the support of one of its navy ships as an escort to the SAN MARINO, to keep at bay any Chinese ship that could try to intercept it.

Not seeing other ships except the Filipino escort ship and with the SPEX oil platform now visible on the horizon, Muñoz looked down on the forward deck at his three passengers on this short coastal trip. Two of them were SPEX employees, one an engineer and the other a production manager. The third passenger was a tall, athletic Canadian woman that had been the visual target of his crew since she had come aboard to go do a news report for CNN on the oil platform. Apart from exciting the libido of his crewmen with her fantastic body, stretching along 183 centimeters of height, she was famous all over the World for many reasons, one being that she had won the Women's World Karate Championship in Tokyo only a month ago and had then defeated the World's male champion in a challenge match after he had insulted her in public. Her numerous television reports and articles from various war zones as a war correspondent had also established her as a professional reporter of great courage and competence. Further, this Nancy Laplante was also a part-time actress, having played in two successful action films to date, including as the She-Hulk in AVENGERS 2, which was still breaking records at the box office and making a fortune for the Marvel Studios. She was certainly bound to attract the undivided attention of the men working on the oil platform once there.

The first sign of trouble came when a small, speedy ship appeared on the western horizon as the SAN MARINO and its towed tanker barge were less than a kilometer from the oil exploration platform. The Filipino Navy ship reacted to it at once, increasing speed and changing its course to interpose itself between the newcomer and the SAN MARINO. Muñoz swore to himself when he recognized the incoming ship as being a Chinese armed patrol boat, probably coming from the nearby base on Mischief Reef. Hoping that the presence of the Filipino Navy ship would be enough to keep that

Chinese boat away, Muñoz concentrated on the delicate job of slowing down and maneuvering the big barge towed by his ship, so that it could be tied alongside the platform prior to being filled with crude oil. That was no easy feat by itself and took a good twenty minutes before the barge and the tugboat were secured to the oil platform. Muñoz' three passengers then climbed aboard the oil platform with their luggage, while crewmen connected a large hose to the tanker barge in order to fill it. Thankfully, the presence of the Filipino Navy ship, an old ex-American minesweeper built in 1944 but bristling with guns and automatic cannons, seemed enough to deter the Chinese patrol boat from approaching too close from the SAN MARINO and the platform, but Muñoz could bet that it was transmitting by radio what it was seeing right now. More Chinese ships could thus very well show up soon.

Nancy gave a worried look at the Chinese patrol boat as she reached the main level of the oil platform with the two SPEX employees that had traveled with her on the SAN MARINO. The dispute for the Spratly Islands had been tense enough for years but, now that a sizeable oil field had been found and was about to start being exploited, the stakes had just become much higher. From her long career as a war correspondent, she understood fairly well how the Chinese communist government functioned and behaved when what it perceived to be its national interests were at stake. With many competing bureaucracies and powerbrokers in the PRC trying to outdo each other constantly in order to get bigger pieces of the pie, diplomatic niceties were often thrown aside, with sometimes rash, uncoordinated actions taken while government spokesmen would spew with straight faces some outrageous statements in order to justify their actions. With the level of animosity and distrust that this dispute had reached, she was nearly certain that something bad was going to happen here, hence her presence as a war correspondent for CNN. As the senior field agent of the Time Patrol, she could have used her access to archives from the future to learn in advance about this crisis, but she had chosen not to, for many reasons. First, she was resolved to live this life of hers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, her true time of origin, as a simple war correspondent and, for the last few years, as a part-time actress, without using her time travel talents except when she had to protect herself in truly dire circumstances. Second, using foreknowledge from the future in order to help her career as a war correspondent ran the risk of creating time causality loops, with consequences often impossible to predict and which could damage the integrity of history, something she had vowed to prevent at all cost as an agent of the

Time Patrol. Finally, using such foreknowledge would be plain cheating, something she was loathe to do. She prided herself of being a true expert in military and international affairs and had used strictly her professional knowledge and experience to predict this looming crisis and then propose to CNN to make an in-depth coverage and analysis of the South China Sea dispute. She had now been roaming the coasts and waters of the South China Sea for two weeks already, much of that time spent in and around Vietnam, one of the main players in that dispute and a country that was engaged in a particularly harsh, bitter confrontation with the PRC. Up to now, everything told her that this dispute was ready to turn sour very fast all over the South China Sea, with the PRC's hard line and militaristic approach succeeding in making the other players in this dispute, tired of being pushed around, agree to form an informal alliance against China.

A big Caucasian man greeted Nancy and the two SPEX employees once they set foot on the main level, shaking hands first with Ferdinand Santiago, the production manager sent from Manila to assess the true potential of the newfound oil field.

"Welcome aboard, Mister Santiago. I am Jack Simpsons, manager of this exploration rig. Unfortunately, as you can see, things may soon become tense here."

"I can see that, Mister Simpsons. Hopefully, cooler heads will prevail. May I present you Mister Derek Blandy, one of our top engineers, who will help me evaluate the production potential of your field. Also with us is Miss Nancy Laplante, correspondent for CNN, who is working on a story about the South China Sea dispute. She is here with the full blessing of our company."

"Welcome aboard, Miss Laplante." Said with a big smile Jack Simpsons while shaking hands with her, admiring her pretty face framed by long black hair, as well as her sparkling green eyes. "It is both a honor and a pleasure to welcome such a famous person as you on our modest installation."

"Some would rather call me infamous, Mister Simpsons. I promise that I won't be in the way while on your platform. I just need a bunk bed and a space to drop my kit and I will be happy. I would like your permission to set up my small portable satellite uplink unit near an external power outlet, so that I could transmit my reports to CNN. In fact, with this Chinese gunboat nearby, I may just send in a report as soon as I'm settled here."

"No problems, Miss Laplante. If you will all follow me, I will lead you to your quarters."

Nancy, along with Santiago and Blandy, followed Simpsons to a nearby access door situated just under the fringe of the platform's helicopter landing pad, entering the fairly large section housing the crew of the platform and following a series of steel corridors. Simpsons finally stopped near three doors lining a side corridor, turning to face his visitors.

"We are now in the senior crew quarters section of the platform. You will each have a cabin with private bathroom and shower. I hope that you will be satisfied."

Nancy entered one of the cabins offered by Simpsons, finding it of fair size and reasonably comfortable in view of where she was. It had air conditioning, a small television set connected to a satellite downlink, a captain's bed and a small work table, plus a large storage locker. A small adjacent bathroom contained a toilet, a sink and a shower stall. Dropping her kit bag on the floor but keeping her backpack satellite antenna unit and her video camera with her, she came out and smiled to Simpsons.

"This will do just fine, Mister Simpsons."

"Please, call me simply Jack, miss."

"And you may call me Nancy. Could you show me a spot where I could set up my antenna unit out of the way of your crew?"

"I certainly can do that while Misters Santiago and Blandy unpack, Nancy. This way, please."

Describing the various compartments they were passing while guiding her, Simpsons went up a series of steep stairs, going up the superstructures of the platform next to the drilling derrick tower. They finally emerged in the open air on the top platform, where a number of antennas were fixed to the steel deck. Going to an empty spot away from the other antennas, Simpsons showed to Nancy a nearby power outlet box next to a guardrail post.

"I believe that this should do for you, Nancy. You can use the guardrail post to tie down your antenna pack. This platform is quite stable but sometimes the winds can be fierce."

"Perfect! If you don't mind, I will do a short report to Atlanta as soon as I'm set here, so that I can test the satellite link."

"You are welcomed to roam around the platform as you wish, Nancy. I will be in the control room, two levels down from here, if you need me."

"Thank you again, Jack. You are very helpful."

“To a beautiful woman like you, always.” Replied the platform manager with a grin before leaving her alone on the top platform. It took only four minutes to Nancy to put down her backpack unit, secure it to the guardrail and deploy its folding antenna, then to point the latter towards a specific point of the sky, getting a satellite link signal. Next, she took out her handheld satellite telephone and called the communications center of the CNN headquarters in Atlanta, advising one of the duty technicians there that she was set up and ready to operate, giving him at the same time the coordinates of the exploration platform. Powering her video camera, which had a UHF radio linking it to her backpack antenna unit, she pointed her lens first at the nearby Filipino Navy ship, then at the Chinese patrol boat still turning around the platform, in order to make sure that Atlanta was receiving a good quality signal. When the CNN technician confirmed that he had a good picture and sound from her, Nancy thanked him and powered down her camera, intent on saving its battery pack for later. Her equipment, paid for by CNN, was the best there was on the market and, while compact and lightweight, had some very advanced features, including an integrated GPS positioning receiver in both her backpack unit and her camera. The GPS unit in her camera was further linked to an eye-safe laser rangefinder that, once powered and pointed, transmitted the precise coordinates of what she was filming, showing them and the date-time data in a small corner window of her recorded picture. She also had a special night vision lens that adapted to her camera if she wished to film in the dark. She was in fact about as well equipped as a modern artillery forward observer in terms of communications and surveillance equipment. The only thing she didn't have with her was a weapon, but then she didn't really need one. First, an openly armed reporter would be frowned upon and would repel potential sources of information. Second, she didn't need weapons to be deadly, at any distance. Her supernatural powers as a Chosen of The One, the immaterial but immensely powerful spiritual being that had first connected with her in 1940 'B', gave her ways to both defend herself and destroy or neutralize an attacker if need be.

With her video camera back in an equipment pouch she wore slung from one shoulder and with a still camera hanging from her neck, Nancy left the antenna platform, going back down to the main level and exploring the oil platform for the next hour or so, getting familiar with its setup and also reading up on the safety regulations and procedures of the platform, which were posted on a wall of the crew lounge. By then,

most of the 37 men working on the platform had learned of her presence aboard, with many of them approaching her to get an autograph from her. She was in the process of signing one of her calling cards and giving it to a happy rig worker when the platform's P.A. system came alive.

"Miss Laplante is requested urgently in the control room. Miss Laplante, please report to the control room at once."

From the tone of Simpsons' voice, who had done the announcement, Nancy guessed that it wasn't simply to invite her for lunch. Getting some quick directions from the rig worker, she then ran down a corridor and up a staircase, ending up in the platform's control room in less than two minutes, barely breathing faster than usual. Jack Simpsons, who stood with Ferdinand Santiago and Derek Blandy in front of one of the large windows of the control room, gave her a worried look.

"I'm afraid that you may have something to report even sooner than you expected, Nancy: three more Chinese warships are now approaching our platform."

"Three warships on top of that gunboat? Let me look at them and I will be able to tell you which type they are."

Taking out of her equipment pouch her camera and pointing it in the direction indicated by Simpsons, she used her zoom lens to focus on three ships approaching fast. She tensed on recognizing them.

"This is effectively bad news, Jack. You have a TYPE 054 missile frigate, the latest type in service in the Chinese Navy, leading two fast missile catamaran boats of the HOUBEI class. I'm afraid that this will be more than just a courtesy visit. You better inform your company headquarters that trouble is brewing here. On my part, I will contact CNN headquarters in Atlanta and will start reporting live."

As Ferdinand Santiago hurriedly went to a satellite telephone unit on a nearby control station, Jack Simpsons looked at Nancy with apprehension.

"What kind of armament would those ships have, Nancy? Could our Filipino escort ship deal with them?"

"Not a chance, Jack! Each of those two catamaran boats is armed with eight long range anti-ship missiles, while the JIANKAI-Class frigate has both anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, a main 100mm gun, four close-in Gatling 30mm guns and two anti-submarine rocket launchers. It also carries one medium helicopter. I'm afraid that this old Filipino corvette out there is hopelessly outgunned and outclassed."

Simpsons, like Blandy and Santiago, paled at these words.

"But, then, what could we do?"

"I don't know about you but, on my part, I will make sure right now that whatever happens here will be shown to the whole World. If you will excuse me, I will go outside on the open bridge to film those ships."

Leaving the control room by a door that gave on the open walkway surrounding it, Nancy grabbed her satellite telephone and called Atlanta, getting a technician there to answer her within seconds.

"CNN central communications center!"

"This is Nancy Laplante, calling from the SPEX exploration oil platform near the Second Thomas Reef, in the South China Sea. I have a situation developing here that could turn into an international incident. Be ready to record my signal and to switch it to the live news desk. I am powering up my video camera right now."

Activating and pointing her camera, Nancy confirmed with the technician that he was getting her video and sound signal well, then asked to be connected to the live news room, getting there the duty editor in charge of collating and prioritizing the news presented live on CNN.

"Jeff, this is Nancy, reporting from the Filipino SPEX oil exploration platform in the Spratly Islands. I arrived on that platform about two hours ago, to report on a new and promising oil field just discovered under the seabed. The tugboat that brought me was towing an empty tanker barge that is presently being filled with 5,000 tons of crude oil from that new oil field. That tugboat was in turn escorted by a Filipino Navy ship that is still protecting the platform. One Chinese patrol boat at first tried to make the tugboat turn around but was kept away by the Filipino ship. However, I now have in sight three more Chinese warships coming fast towards the platform. This may turn ugly very quickly, with the Filipino ship hopelessly outgunned."

"I can see those approaching warships on my television screen now. What do you expect them to do once close to the platform, Nancy?"

"At the minimum, they will try to intimidate the Filipino ship into fleeing, then could very well board this platform and take it by force, as they claim that this whole area is part of Chinese territorial waters. The new oil field just discovered by the Filipino SPEX company has too much potential not to attract greed, Jeff. At the worse, the Chinese may simply sink that Filipino escort ship and then take the platform. Whatever happens next, I will be transmitting live as long as I can."

“Christ! This could indeed become big news. I’m going to switch you to Bill, at the live anchor desk.”

“Thanks, Jeff. I am ready to report now.”

### **11:42 (Philippines Time)**

#### **United States Pacific Command headquarters**

#### **Pearl Harbor, Hawaii**

“Sir, you should see this on the CNN news feed.”

The duty operations officer in the big operations center of the United States Pacific Command, which controlled all the American forces in and around the Pacific, hurried to one of the television sets tuned at all times to various news channels, including CNN, and watched and listened for a few seconds the live report from Nancy before giving an order to a junior officer sitting at a nearby station.

“Show me what we have near the Spratly Islands at this time, Lieutenant.”

The young officer frowned when he got that information, projecting it on a monitor screen for the benefit of the duty operations officer.

“It is rather slim, sir. We only have the USS INDEPENDENCE over there, but it is presently less than a hundred nautical miles from that oil platform. Our next nearest ship, the USS VIRGINIA nuclear attack submarine, is over 560 nautical miles away.”

The rear admiral on duty frowned on hearing this: despite what official Navy spokespersons said, the LCS class, for Littoral Combat Ship, was an expensive lemon, overpriced, under armed and full of design and construction flaws. The only thing it had in its favor was its high maximum speed of over forty knots.

“Very well, Lieutenant. Advise the USS INDEPENDENCE and tell her to head at highest speed towards that oil platform in order to assess the situation there. Then, advise as well the USS VIRGINIA and tell her to be ready to support the INDEPENDENCE if need be. Do we have any combat planes in or near the Philippines at this time?”

“Uh, one moment, sir... Sir, we have four F/A-18F SUPER HORNETs on the ground at Clark Air Base, in the Philippines. They are there on a joint training exercise with the Filipino Air Force. With drop tanks, they could get to that oil platform and keep station over it for about one hour.”

“Scramble them! I am going to inform the Admiral of this: this whole thing could turn ugly quickly indeed.”

### **11:58 (Philippines Time)**

#### **SPEX oil exploration platform**

#### **Near Second Thomas Reef, Spratly Islands**

#### **South China Sea**

Looking gloomy, Jack Simpsons joined Nancy, who was still on the open catwalk and filming the approaching Chinese ships, now less than four kilometers away.

“The Chinese just contacted us by radio: they gave us one hour to evacuate the platform and leave what they call ‘Chinese territorial waters’ before they will board and seize this platform.”

“And what are the SPEX and the Filipino government saying about that, Jack?”

“We still don’t have a reaction from them, but I suspect that they will try to call the Chinese bluff on this: there is too much at stake here to simply abandon the platform and flee.”

Nancy gave the manager a cautious look.

“Jack, this may not be a bluff. If the oil field you found is as valuable as you think, then the Chinese will do everything to grab it and annex it. You know that the Filipino Navy is in no state to oppose such a Chinese move.”

“Maybe, but Mister Santiago is not ready to let go our platform without at least some token resistance. He ordered me to arm my workers with the few rifles and shotguns we have aboard to deter local pirates. He also expects Manila to order us to stay put and to hope for the best. The escort ship will stay around in the meantime, at least until our tanker barge is full, in about half a hour. Then, it will escort the SAN MARINO and its barge back to port, but will leave with us a squad of armed sailors to help defend the platform against boarders.”

“You realize that this could well result into spilled blood, Jack.”

“I know, but simply giving in to these Chinese bullies is too infuriating.”

Simpsons then returned inside, leaving Nancy to continue watching the Chinese warships.

Twenty minutes later, as the SAN MARINO and its now full oil barge were ready to separate from the oil platform, Ferdinand Santiago called Nancy inside the control room to give her the official Filipino response to the Chinese ultimatum. Waiting for Nancy to be online and filming him, the SPEX official put on a brave face and spoke up firmly in English while facing Nancy's camera.

"My company and the government of the Philippines have just issued the following joint declaration concerning the attempts by Chinese warships to take control of this oil exploration platform. Despite what the government of the Peoples' Republic of China may say, the Ayugin Reef, also known as the Second Thomas Reef, are Filipino possessions, along with the waters surrounding it, being well inside our Exclusive Economic Zone and having been claimed by the Philippines as such according to recognized international rules. The claims by the PRC that the Ayugin Reef and its waters are territorial Chinese waters are considered baseless by the government of the Philippines and will thus be ignored. Furthermore, the government of the Philippines will officially complain to the United Nations and to the ASEAN organization about this attempt at high seas piracy by the PRC. It is also resolved in defending its rightful possessions in the Spratly Islands from the abusive behavior of Chinese ships and has called for the help of its allies in the region to help it defend its maritime borders. It is now up to the Chinese government to show common sense and restraint and thus avoid the pointless use of violence over that of diplomacy."

"And what will be the response of the Filipino government if the Chinese try to seize by force this oil platform, Mister Santiago?" Asked Nancy while still filming.

"It will defend its territory, as international law gives it the full right to do, Miss Laplante. The Philippines Navy ship QUEZON is now going to escort back to port the tugboat SAN MARINO and the barge it is towing and has been authorized to open fire if any Chinese ship tries to interfere with the tugboat or its barge. Let this be a warning to the PRC government about our resolve in this matter. That is all for now."

Nancy blew air out as Santiago finished his speech and she stopped filming him.

"This is a very dangerous game that your company and government is playing, Mister Santiago."

"Maybe, but we are proud people and we have been pushed too often and too far by the Chinese to back down from this. Please keep this to yourself, as it would only fire up Chinese greed, but our latest estimate of the capacity of this oil field is over twenty billion barrels of high quality crude."

“Twenty billion barrels?! But, that could completely turn around the economy of the Philippines.”

“Very much so, miss. That is why we are resolved to stand up at all cost to China on this. The QUEZON just sent by boat a squad of armed sailors to help defend this platform. Furthermore, more soldiers will arrive soon by helicopter to reinforce our defenses, while all the available warships of the Philippines Navy are starting to converge on us. If the Chinese want a fight, then it will get one.”

Nancy had the good taste of not pointing out that such a fight could well turn into a one-sided massacre, but she also had to admire the resolve of the Filipinos. She could thus only wish like them that the Chinese would become reasonable and back down from their threats.

That wish proved futile fifteen minutes later, when the SAN MARINO and its towed barge full of crude oil started sailing away under escort. The original Chinese patrol boat that had challenged the SAN MARINO on arrival at the platform moved at once to cut its path, despite the presence of the QUEZON. With the scene filmed and transmitted live on CNN, the QUEZON at first fired in succession three warning shots across the bow of the Chinese boat to warn it away. The Chinese captain still came on, going for the tugboat while pointing its guns at the QUEZON. Now out of options, the Filipino ship fired its three-inch guns again, this time shooting straight at the Chinese patrol boat from a distance of less than 400 meters and hitting it squarely with two shells. While seriously damaged and with casualties on board, the Chinese boat continued on towards the SAN MARINO while shooting back at the QUEZON with its heavy machineguns. Pumping out shells as quickly as they could, the gunners of the QUEZON were able to immobilize the Chinese patrol boat and turn it into a smocking, burning wreck, despite suffering casualties of their own. That triumph was however short-lived, as long flames and trails of smoke then marked the launch by the two HOUBEI-Class boats of two of their anti-ship missiles. Fired from what was for them short ranges, the missiles quickly hit the QUEZON and exploded. Under live television coverage, the unfortunate Filipino ship broke in two and sank rapidly, pulling its entire crew to its death, save for one sailor. That drama was watched with both shock and horror on the oil platform. On her part, Nancy then concentrated her attention on the three surviving Chinese warships. To her surprise, her camera then caught the launch of one of the HongQi-7 surface-to-air missiles of the JIANGKAI-Class frigate. Tracking the outgoing

missile with her camera, she then realized that a helicopter had been approaching the oil platform from the East. She was able through her zoom lenses to recognize the type of the helicopter just before the missile impacted it, disintegrating it into small pieces that fell in the ocean.

“ATLANTA, THE CHINESE FRIGATE JUST SHOT DOWN A SH-60 SEAHAWK HELICOPTER THAT WAS APPROACHING THIS OIL PLATFORM FROM THE EAST. I...WAIT A SECOND! I CAN NOW SEE ITS MARKINGS THROUGH MY ZOOM LENS: IT IS A UNITED STATES NAVY HELICOPTER! ATLANTA, A CHINESE WARSHIP JUST SHOT DOWN AN AMERICAN HELICOPTER INSIDE THE PHILIPPINES EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONE!”

Both at the CNN headquarters in Atlanta and at the Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii, where a number of duty officers were watching Nancy's report, men and women froze at that announcement for a moment. The admiral in command of the Pacific forces, cold rage filling him, grabbed at once a telephone linking him with his operations officer, barking in the handset.

“Vice Admiral Parker, contact at once our four SUPER HORNET fighter-bombers about to fly over that oil platform in the Spratly Islands and tell them that their mission is now to sink those damn Chinese warships that just shot down our helicopter... Yes, you understood me well: sink them! Put as well all our forces in the Pacific on high alert.”

Totally oblivious of the huge mistake he had just made and thinking that he had simply shot down a Filipino helicopter bringing reinforcements to the SPEX oil platform, the captain of the Chinese frigate decided to concentrate for the moment on the main prize, the platform itself, instead of pursuing the fleeing SAN MARINO and its barge full of crude oil. Slowing down and stopping while the two missile boats kept watch from some distance away, the frigate started lowering a motor boat full of armed sailors in the water. With Nancy still filming live, the motor boat then sped towards the oil platform while the 100mm main gun turret of the frigate rotated to point at the big floating structure. The motor boat was still 300 meters from the platform when the captain of the frigate was advised that a speedy ship of apparently small size was now showing on the surface search radar, heading directly for him. Assuming that it was a Filipino fast attack boat rushing in to the rescue of the oil platform, the Chinese captain gave at once the order to fire on it, tasking the two accompanying HOUBEI missile boats for that. On the SPEX platform, Nancy was again able to film those missile firings, with a total of six anti-

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