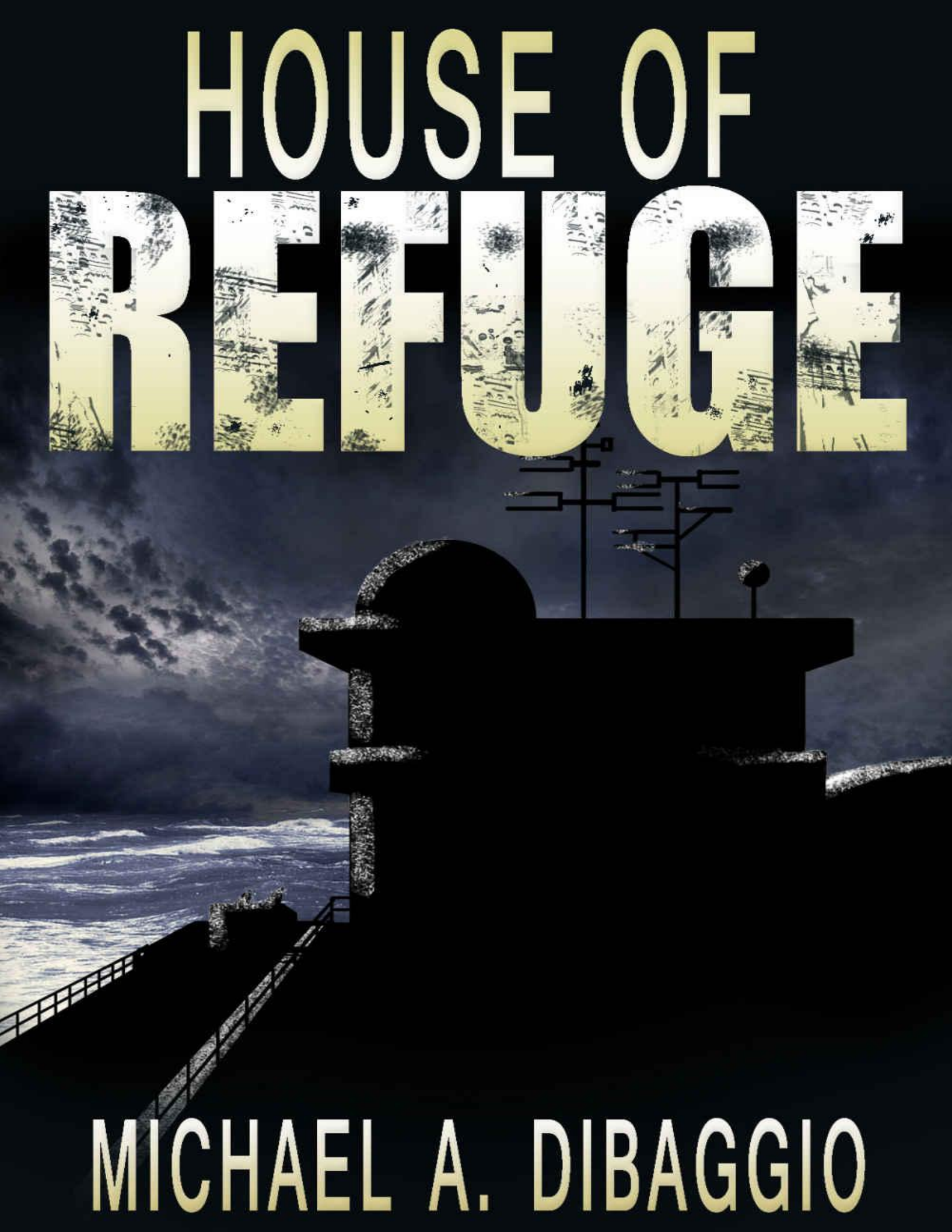


# HOUSE OF REFUGE



MICHAEL A. DIBAGGIO

**House of Refuge**  
by Michael A. DiBaggio

**With Illustrations by**  
Shell “Presto” DiBaggio

Second Printing

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# House of Refuge



# I

It was four o'clock in the morning when the electronic chime of the boat gong jolted Justin Agnarsson from his hard-won sleep. He blinked blearily at the flashing blue light on the overhead, wondering where and when he was and why he should not just roll over and go back to sleep. The scent of saltwater and the gentle pitching of his bed reminded him that he was on duty, and as stationkeeper he always would be. He slung himself off the mattress and began the mechanical motions of dressing while he watched the small monitor atop his bureau. The video feed from the well dock showed him the cause of the disturbance: a long hulled RHIB run up on the ramp and two stumbling figures in orange rain slicks tying a mooring line. A quick glance at the meteorological panel reported only light rain, a westerly wind of 17 knots and a wave height of only three feet.

'Hardly shipwreck weather,' he thought. He checked a second monitor for distress beacons, but there were none. It had been almost a month since anyone drifted to the refuge in need of assistance, and had it been the middle of the afternoon instead of the middle of the night, Agnarsson would have assumed it was a couple of old salts come aboard to share part of their catch and spin a yarn, and he'd have been grateful for the visit. At this hour, he had no idea what to expect. Out of habit, he took his sidearm off the bureau and holstered it, then finished dressing and ducked out the watertight hatch.

At the station store, he retrieved a medical kit, a gallon of fresh water, and a couple of thermal blankets. "Ahoy, lifeboat. How many souls aboard?" he called into the wall intercom.

He overheard muttering, snippets of a conversation in Spanish. Belatedly the answer came, a man's voice, hoarse and tight. "*Dos.*"

He frowned. That lifeboat was easily big enough to hold a dozen people. When Agnarsson asked in his own inexpert Spanish if they carried any fatalities, the reply was negative.

Agnarsson climbed down two ladders to the well deck, eyeing the two bodies huddled against the bulkhead. There was a man, tall but stooped, with his arm draped across the back of a younger girl, who hugged her knees and stared sullenly out to sea. Agnarsson guessed that she was 15 or 16 years old. He could hear their hushed whispers punctuated by bursts of sobbing.

He crouched beside them, handing them the blankets and water. "Are either of you injured? Where are you from?"

They shook their heads to the first question and provided no ready answer to the second.

"Should I expect more boats?"

"Just us," said the man. He was stout and barrel-chested, with a thick red beard and the deep tan of a mariner. Agnarsson judged that he was at least a decade his senior.

"Where did you come from?" the stationkeeper repeated.

"Our home. It burned," the man answered haltingly.

"I'm sorry," Agnarsson said blandly. These little tragedies happened often enough that his condolences began to sound rote; it was a hard life living on the sea, and seastead fires were especially common.

"Well, we have food, clothing, and bunks above deck. I'll try to make you as comfortable as I can until we can get you to land or another vessel. Do you..." He hesitated. He was about to ask if their seastead was insured. There was no question about helping people adrift on the sea, no matter where they came from or what their financial condition was, of course, but houses of refuge like this one didn't run on good feelings alone. Whatever the answer was, it could wait, he decided.

“Do you have any family or friends I can get in touch with? On shore or at sea?” he asked.

The other man’s glazed eyes flicked over him, stared through him. The girl wept.

Agnarsson nodded stiffly, brushed his hand through his short blond hair. “Let’s get something warm into your bellies, and then I’ll show you to your quarters. You can get changed and take a hot shower, whatever you need to do.”

“Thank you, sir,” the man said. Careworn lines around his eyes deepened as he asked, “Have you radioed about us yet?”

“Uh, no, not as yet. You caught me out of a dead sleep,” Agnarsson answered apologetically. “We’re supposed to have a crew of four, but right now this is a one-man operation.”

The castaway seemed encouraged by this news. “Please, sir, I have to speak with you before you make that report. It’s essential. Absolutely essential!”

Surprised by the man’s insistence, Agnarsson found himself nodding. “Very well. The report can wait until after breakfast.”

Agnarsson led his two guests into the galley and sat them down. As he rooted through the pantry, he wondered what the story would be, and whether he’d be offered a bribe for forgetting to make a report. Probably they did not have insurance and didn’t want to be hit with the bill for rescue. Or maybe they were smugglers, attacked by a rival crew, and they didn’t want any word of their survival getting out. Heaven knew there were enough smugglers and privateering operations in the 350-mile-long flotilla of seasteads and platforms known as the Plata Raft, a trade of misery and desperation fueled by the Brazilian-Argentine War. The grim situation ashore suggested other possibilities as well: maybe there was no seastead at all, and they were refugees or even escapees from a prison camp. Maybe they had escaped from the illicit traffic in human beings that still plied these waters. Agnarsson’s employer, Atlantic Littoral, rendered free assistance to war refugees and escaped slaves, but such people often preferred to keep a low profile, fearful of falling back into the clutches of their oppressors. Whatever the truth, the young stationkeeper prepared himself for a grim story. He brewed some coffee and loaded eggs, bacon, and instant potatoes into the AutoChef and returned to the table.

“Let me to welcome you to South Atlantic House of Refuge Number 49, or *Sweet Surcease*, as we call her.” Mounted on the wall behind them there was an ancient piece of driftwood with that name burned into it, the work of the station’s first keeper more than twenty years ago. “My name is Justin Agnarsson. No need to stand on formality, just call me Justin if you like.”

“Thank you, sir. We are very grateful.” The man extended a calloused hand across the table. Agnarsson noticed that it trembled. “My name is Horacio Vietes. This is my daughter, Sandra.”

The dark-haired young woman stared unblinkingly at the floor and pulled tight the blanket wrapped around her, but said nothing.

“You wanted to speak with me before I made my report.”

Horacio Vietes hesitated, folding his hands and pressing them to his lips. At length, he replied with a question. “Is there any way you can see not to report this?”

The stationkeeper arched his brow as if in surprise, though he expected the request. “That would be highly irregular. I’m required to report all arrivals and all disasters at sea. Surely there are people who want to know that you and your daughter are alive?”

“That, sir, is the problem,” said Horacio. “I will be forthright, and leave the decision to your judgment. We were attacked by an Argentine warship. They boarded us without warning, and when I challenged them, they shot at us. My wife—” His voice grew strained again, and began to crack.

Agnarsson winced. There was no doubt what the man was about to say.

“My wife and my little boy were gunned down,” he ground out.

“On what cause were you boarded?”

“You will have to ask them,” he snapped, and his red eyes darted angrily. “I left Argentina fifteen years ago. We are not citizens, our home was not under its flag.”

“You moored in territorial waters?” Agnarsson asked.

“No. In the Raft, just as we are now.”

Agnarsson knew that both sides had made threats of interdicting vessels and seasteads in international waters, but this was the first he'd heard of any such action. If true, it was a dramatic escalation of the war. The Plata Raft, like all other high seas traffic, was guaranteed freedom from interference, and there were a lot of other flags flying on those vessels, flags of clades and states alike that would not quietly accept such aggression. It would risk the entry of other parties into the war, a war that was already going against the Argentines. There was only one reason that Agnarsson could think of for them to risk it.

“Mr. Vietes, I have to ask you something in my official capacity as an officer of Atlantic Littoral, and I expect an honest reply. But first, let me assure you that, no matter how you answer, you and your daughter are in no danger of being turned over to the Argentine navy. Houses of refuge are inviolable under the terms of the Treaty of Tokyo, as well as the Common Accords on Mediation, Extradition, Restitution, and Arbitration. As a matter of policy, Atlantic Littoral does not turn over the custody refugees or survivors at sea to hostile parties. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“Were you knowingly involved in piracy or privateering against Argentina, or smuggling of contraband?”

“Sir, you speak of treaties and the CAMERA accords, but they are just pieces of paper. What word do you give me man to man?”

Agnarsson straightened in his chair. “On my honor, I swear that I will live up to those terms, or else die failing to live up to them.”

Horacio gave a slow nod. “Yes. I helped deliver weapons and fuel to the Coloradan rebels. But my family had no part in it.”

“Your family had every part of it,” Sandra snarled. Her father shot her a sharp glance, but she didn't heed it.

“I am proud to have aided the *Colorados*. We have nothing to feel guilty for. The *Reconstructos* weren't satisfied just to murder grandfather and your brothers on land, they had to butcher Mama and Pedro, too. They are the guilty ones!”

“Be silent right now!”

“No!” She turned her fierce gaze on Agnarsson and spoke bitterly. “I don't care if you call us pirates or smugglers. Unless they kill me first, I will do it all over again. And again, and again, until all the *Reconstructo* filth is washed from the earth! I will fight them with my last breath, and then may I die with my hands around their throats!”

Agnarsson would have been dismayed to hear those words from a grown man, much less an innocent in the early bloom of womanhood. He pitied her transformation almost as much as he pitied the loss of her family. Here was one of the tragedies of war that too often went unremarked, the outrages that transform the innocent into monsters and poison whole generations with hate.

“I am sorry for my daughter's outburst. I implore you to forget her words.”

“I will not forget them,” said Sandra.

“I am sorry for all that happened to you. Regardless of anything else, firing on a woman and a child in their home is unconscionable,” Agnarsson said. “I must make my report, but I won't mention



anything you just told me. Not yet, anyway. For now I'll report you as war refugees. That way you'll have some help finding a place to live. Until then, you'll be safe here."

"Please! If you do, they will know where we are. They will come for us!"

"I doubt it. The whole world would come down on them." The AutoChef buzzed, and Agnarsson stood up. "Try to eat something if you can, and then rest. You'll be safe here."



## II

Agnarsson stood alone on the uppermost deck of the observation tower, scanning the frothy green surface of the Argentine Sea through binoculars. Having emptied its burden on the ocean, the wall of east-moving clouds had desaturated to a light, vaporous gray and begun to break up, allowing the passage of the first direct rays of morning. To the west, the flood lamps on the shadowy bulks of scattered seasteads began to wink out and the masts of more distant vessels became visible for the first time without aid of their navigational lights.

He had dispatched his morning report about twenty five minutes ago, received the reply and standby instruction twenty two minutes ago, and received an electronic query from the Argentine warship *Furibundo* fifteen minutes ago. The message informed him of “coastal security” operations conducted the previous night, and the pursuit of two known illicit weapon traffickers and unlawful combatants, listing Horacio and Sandra Vietes by name, and might these not be the same alleged refugees? Agnarsson dutifully left it unanswered. But now he was being hailed on the ship-to-ship radio. The stationkeeper considered leaving the hail unanswered as well, but he wasn’t going to allow them any excuse to “render assistance.”

“Atlantic Littoral Refuge 49, go ahead *Furibundo*,” he replied in English, hoping that would lend some difficulty to the affair. There was a delay, but he eventually received a reply in the most obsequious English.

“Refuge 49, have sent you electronic bulletin warning of known, dangerous war criminals. Can you please offer confirmation? We are prepared to render assistance, over.”

Agnarsson’s smile was tight and rueful. “Received bulletin. No assistance necessary. My compliments to your captain and the Argentine Navy for its responsible stewardship of the seas. Refuge 49, out.”

Agnarsson wasn’t worried. He expected the Argentines to inquire; in fact, he expected them to pester him for much of the day. This was his first assignment as a Stationkeeper, but he had seen similar scenarios play out when he was an ALERT man, and he had been told what to expect by veteran stationkeepers who had gone through the same rigmarole a dozen times in their lives. What he didn’t expect, what was nearly unthinkable, was that the Argentines might try to force the issue. To violate a house of refuge was a grave crime under both treaties and customary law. It was an act of piracy, rendering one a *hostis humani generis*—an enemy of humanity—and inviting the most severe retribution that no flag or writ would shield one from. In the 29 years Agnarsson had lived, no life saving ship or station had been attacked by any state or Clade anywhere on earth.

The stationkeeper’s more immediate worry was Sandra. Her reaction reminded Agnarsson of his late father, who had fought against California in the Pan-American War. Justin, the youngest of four siblings, was born after the war, and he never knew his father before the nightmares, before the periods of depression punctuated by episodes of drunkenness and spasmodic violence, but his mother did, and she knew a very different man than the one that came back from the Klamath front. She used to tell Justin stories of the old days, of his father’s easygoing nature and the unassuming gentleness that won her love. That was before the bitterness at the horrors he’d witnessed - and maybe, Justin dared to think, the horrors he’d committed - ate him alive. Sandra’s tirade could have been quoted from Justin’s father, right down to the line about *wiping their filth from the earth*. It even shared the same uncaring - even welcome - recognition that those impulses were self-destructive.

Sandra’s words and her rage-contorted face burned in his mind, haunting him like his father’s ghost. It was enough of a tragedy for tough men like Horacio and his own father to live with such a

burden, but it was intolerable to think of a young woman shouldering that weight. Sandra deserved to finish growing up in a place free from the hate-fueling fear and dehumanizing impulses of war, and, with time, mend her heartbreak. If she could be gotten out of the war, then maybe the war could be gotten out of her.

He had hope for that. Clade Britannia had already taken on refugees from the war, treated them with decency and dignity in Avonshire and St. Helena. They might be willing to take some more. That arrangement could have additional benefits, namely that her father might never see prosecution; the Crown-in-exile had no love for Argentina since the botched blockade of the Falklands last year.

Agnarsson turned around at the sound of footsteps. It was Sandra. She had pulled her wet hair back in a ponytail and was dressed in one of the station's coveralls, too big for her in every dimension. She stepped off the ladder and stood stiffly, her lips pursed. "My father told me to apologize to you," she eventually said, and in crisp English.

Agnarsson realized she wasn't actually going to offer that apology, so he interceded. "I don't know what for."

"Neither do I."

The stationkeeper smiled. "You speak English well, better than I speak Spanish."

"My mother insisted." Her voice took on a hard edge. All her grief had hardened into wrath.

"It was good that she did," he said. "We've settled some refugees on the Isle of Avonshire, far north of here. They speak English there."

"I know where it is," she said. "But we're not refugees. We're smugglers and rebels."

Agnarsson grew annoyed. "That's not your determination to make."

"Whose is it?"

"Mine!"

Suddenly, the ship-to-ship radio crackled again. It was *Furibundo*. Agnarsson held up his hand for silence and took the radio handset.

"Station 49, Corvette Captain Larrea requests the pleasure of your presence for supper. He would consider it a great honor to dine with you. If your duties do not allow you to leave your station, he and a small complement of officers might visit your station, food and preparations compliments of the Argentine Navy."

'Death by courtesy,' Agnarsson thought and almost laughed, only restraining himself for the sake of the young woman that stood behind him. "Please extend my thanks to Captain Larrea and your crew, but I must regretfully decline. I am ill and contagious with little appetite. Influenza, I think. Another time, perhaps."

The Argentine reply was immediate and little too enthusiastic. "We can send the ship's doctor to you right away."

"Many thanks again, *Furibundo*, but that will not be necessary. I must attend to my duties now, Station 49 out."

Agnarsson replaced the handset and turned to Sandra, eager to reassure her. "This is just a little game they're playing. They won't come."

But the girl did not seem in need of reassuring. Her voice was an intense whisper. "You should have accepted. Let me set the table. I would slit Captain Larrea's throat with one of your shiny bread knives."

He glowered at her. "You shouldn't be contemplating slitting any throats, especially not with a bread knife."

"You side with a murderer," Sandra said coldly.

Her words and the look of contempt that burned in her eyes left him stunned and angry. “You’re a stupid child. If I did, you wouldn’t be here insulting me.”

“And you are a coward! If you weren’t, you would have joined the navy and gone to fight your country’s enemies instead of making beds for drunk fishermen!”

“Just like Captain Larrea did?”

The girl flinched, stunned into open-mouthed silence. Her hard expression softened and shame crept into her eyes, but she’d gone too far to elicit any sympathy from Agnarsson.

“See yourself below deck,” he growled. “I have beds to make.”



### III

The drone could not be seen, but its buzzing was audible. As the morning wore on, it had gone from overflying the station at low altitudes to hovering in place, hidden somewhere above the light cloud cover. Agnarsson wound up the pressure hose he'd been scaling the deck with and looked over his shoulder at Horacio Vietes. "I wish you'd stay inside. It may be safer."

"Safe?" Horacio coughed as he discarded his cigarette into the water. "How? You said they already knew we were here."

"I said that they *think* you're here," Agnarsson corrected him. "And if that drone gets a good look at you, they'll know for sure. If they have a submarine drone with a good microphone, they already know because you keep bringing it up."

Horacio's voice dropped to a whisper. "They will not give up."

"It doesn't matter anyway. You and your daughter will be flying north by this time tomorrow."

"What will stop them from shooting us down?"

Agnarsson looked at him sharply. He was aggravated at having to repeat his reassurances, especially because he was starting to get unnerved himself. The Argentine corvette hadn't steamed off. *Furibundo*. The longer he saw her circling them, silhouetted against the horizon, the more portentous that name seemed.

"I thought we were safe in my seastead as well, a hundred miles off the coast. That demon has no limits. I wish you had not sent that report. Why couldn't you have waited a few more hours, or a day?"

Agnarsson sighed. 'I probably should have,' he thought. 'No, don't start down that road. They're trying to make you sweat, but you can't allow it. And what good does it do to worry about it anyway?' He could not, would not, hand over the Vieteses no matter what.

"I'm going to check if there's any word from Atlantic Littoral on your pickup. Please go back inside. Eat something, read a book, watch TV. Do anything but worry about this."

Inside, Agnarsson found what he'd hoped for. There was a communiqué from Avonshire granting his request for a refugee transfer. A floatplane was to be dispatched tomorrow. For the first time in several hours, he felt optimistic.

Then the ship-to-ship whistled. He was being hailed again.

"Attention Atlantic Littoral Refuge Number 49, this is the *ARA Furibundo*. The two people you are harboring as war refugees are known unlawful combatants engaged in a state of war against the Argentine Republic. By warrant of the President of Argentina, we are charged with taking them into custody and expect your cooperation in accord with the law of civilized nations."

With one taut movement, Agnarsson grabbed the radio handset and pulled it to his lips. His thumb shook with nervous energy on the transmitter button, sending dead air across the wire. He fought to steady his voice. "This is a house of refuge, and may not be subjected to threats or violence—in accord with the law of all civilized nations. I am the custodian of war refugees and I am neither empowered, nor am I willing, to surrender them to a belligerent."

"Harboring pirates and terrorists is a violation of the law, as well as a breach of trust of a house of refuge. We insist that you surrender these pirates without further delay. If you refuse, you force us to take action to retrieve them."

It was madness. 'The whole world will come down on them,' he thought again, only to realize that it didn't matter if they did, because by then he and all that was left of the Vietes family would be dead. Agnarsson felt nauseous. He had been so confident, but Horacio was right after all. They had no

limits.

“Refuge 49, what are your intentions?” the voice on the radio demanded.

There was only one answer he could give to that. “Go to Hell, *Furibundo*.”

Agnarsson activated the station’s automated defensive systems: two radar-guided 30mm autocannons and a single deuterium-fluoride laser. Both systems were for point defense against small boats and missiles—useless against *Furibundo* unless it blundered in much closer than she needed to, but certainly useful against a boarding party—or the damned drone that had been buzzing the refuge.

‘Assuming that any of them work,’ he thought. Both systems were as old as the station; while regular maintenance was done on them, neither had been test-fired in years. Realistically, it wouldn’t matter. He could not fight off the corvette with the paltry self-defense systems on the refuge. What he needed was outside help.

Luckily stationkeepers wielded a formula for such an unlikely contingency, an incantation against harm crafted by lawyers and diplomats. Agnarsson chanted it on the long-range radio, and it went like this: “Mayday, mayday. This is South Atlantic House of Refuge 49, requesting immediate assistance against rogue Argentine naval vessel *Furibundo*. My position is 38 degrees, two minutes, 1 second South, 54 degrees, 37 minutes, 31 seconds West. By my authority as Stationkeeper of an international life saving installation, I hereby issue a general Letter of Marque for the defense of this station against any and all who threaten it.”

He repeated the distress call in Spanish and French, and set it to cycle continuously.

“Chew on that, Captain Larrea,” Agnarsson said to himself. He desperately wanted to believe that he had just called their bluff, that the transmission would force the captain to withdraw. The next message from the ship-to-ship shattered that fantasy.

“Refuge 49, disarm your weapons and prepare to be boarded.”





## IV

“You’ve killed us!” Horacio’s voice was so taut it became shrill. His big frame trembled with anger and fear.

Agnarsson said nothing. He charged the bolt on the CR-10 rifle and re-checked the safety. He wondered if Vietes would shoot him if he handed the gun over to him.

The three of them were gathered in the ‘storm cellar’, a watertight keep in the center of the station, partially beneath the waterline. Behind its armored bulkheads and hermetically sealed hatches were the armory, sick bay, the emergency stores, and a secondary command center from which the refuge’s sensors, radios, and weapons could all be controlled. It could be steered from here as well, though that was of no use now. The refuge, unlike many seasteeds, had its own engines, but she moved with all the grace and speed of a pregnant cow; outrunning the swift hydrofoil that menaced them was impossible.

“You killed us!” Horacio repeated. “You locked us in here to die! God damn me! We should have left in the lifeboat!” He appealed to his daughter, his eyes red and filled with tears. “Forgive your father for being so stupid and reckless.”

“You wouldn’t have gotten far,” Agnarsson said. “Their drones would have picked you off as soon as you left the well dock.”

Horacio punched the wall and roared. “What difference does it make? They will come *here* and kill us!”

“That remains to be seen.” Agnarsson tried to reflect calm, but his patience and his courage were fraying.

“They will just shell us. They’ll sink the whole refuge,” Sandra said. Her voice and her manner were disturbingly calm.

“If they do there’s nothing we can do about it.” He slung his rifle and turned his attention back to the arsenal, loading a drum of three-inch flechette shells into an automatic shotgun. “But if they were going to do that, I think we’d be dead already.”

Agnarsson tossed a flak jacket and a helmet to each of them. “Put them on and keep them on,” he ordered, then turned to Sandra. “Have you fired a gun before?”

Her eyes glinted. “Yes.”

He thrust the shotgun into her chest. She grunted as she tucked it under her shoulder. “It’s heavy.”

“Yes, well it’s not a bread knife,” Agnarsson said. He moved behind her, pulled the strap across her body and adjusted it so that it bore most of the weight of the weapon. He told her how to brace it and where best to aim. All day long he had schemed to remove the girl from a world of murder and mayhem and now he armed and instructed her on how best to kill other men. The irony wasn’t lost on him, but scruples and idealism wouldn’t save her life now.

Her father looked on at the scene in wonder. “My daughter is no soldier,” he said.

Agnarsson glared at him. ‘Only now you realize it.’ He wanted to give voice to that thought, but the words caught in his throat. He knew that his judgment wasn’t fair, that wars had a way of dragging people in, even those who tried mightily to avoid it, but still he held Horacio Vietes responsible for his family’s peril.

“Hail the ship,” Horacio said, almost at a whisper. He licked his dry lips. “Hail the ship. Tell them that I will surrender. Just spare my daughter.”

“Papa, no!”

“They’ll execute you summarily,” said Agnarsson.

“But my daughter will live. And you.” Horacio sagged visibly. “I have already brought death to too many.”

“That’s out of the question. Out of the question!” Agnarsson yelled, suddenly ashamed of his resentment for the man.

“For God’s sake, what other choice is there?”

Now it was Agnarsson that punched the wall. He turned round fiercely, pointing at Horacio as blood dripped from his split knuckles. “This isn’t just about the here and now! It’s about every man, woman, and child who will ever set foot on a refuge, every innocent huddled in a camp or hiding in their home! This is about civilization itself. I won’t give that away, not in the face of all the bombs and guns on the planet! Because if I do, it won’t stop here. There won’t be any stopping it, anywhere.”

He pushed past Horacio, making for the radio in the command center. He should have had it on already, been listening for messages from Atlantic Littoral or any ships that might come to help. He blew a thick layer of dust off the buttons of the long-neglected console and tuned the receiver to the emergency channel. The loud thrumming and screeching from the speakers startled him, and he switched it off with a groan.

“Is it broken?” Sandra asked. She had come up behind him silently, watching him with other words in mind than what she spoke.

“They’re jamming us. They’re drowning out the distress call.”

“Someone would have heard it already,” she suggested.

“Yes,” he said stiffly. “Yes, they might’ve.”

“You are not a coward, Justin,” Sandra said. “It was despicable of me to say so. Everyone who lives on the sea is grateful for lifesavers like you. You are very courageous, and I am sorry for thinking otherwise.”

Agnarsson unslung the rifle and flopped backwards into the chair. He looked over his shoulder at Sandra; she looked absurd in the bulky body armor, cuddling the shotgun.

Sandra walked over beside him. “What now? Do we just wait?”

Agnarsson cocked his head. “What else is there?”

“You’re from North America, I think,” she suddenly said.

He answered slowly, as if he had to work to stir up the memory. “Cascadia. I was born in a place called Cowichan, on Vancouver Island.”

“Did you like it?”

He nodded. “Very much.”

“Of course you would. North America is free,” she mused. “You can go anywhere. And you can say what you want, and buy and sell what you want. You can make a living without anyone’s permission.”

“Not everywhere.”

“But for the most part. There are governments, but they are small and weak. No standing armies, no secret police. For the most part.”

“For the most part, that’s true.”

“You can’t know what it’s like here. We weren’t so lucky last century. The invaders didn’t make it this far, there was no one to burn our capitols and break our shackles. That’s what the *Colorados* fight for.”

“Convincing me of your politics isn’t going to help us any, Sandra.”

She shrugged. “I’m not trying to convince you. You already know it. You know what things are good and worth dying for.”

“I also know that there are things worth living for,” he answered swiftly. “And I wish you weren’t so eager to die. Or to kill.”

An electronic warning tone sounded. Agnarsson swiveled to the tactical console, saw the radar screen flashing, and then several things happened almost simultaneously. The walls vibrated, shaken by the full-throated roar of the 30mm gun on the deck above them, and then a deafening report rang through the hull, rocking the refuge violently. The camera feed and radar from the deck gun went black.

“They’re shelling us!” Horacio shouted. He ran to shield his daughter and she clung to him.

“No,” Agnarsson hissed. “It’s that damned drone! It took out the gun.”

Suddenly, defense laser control toned and a synthesized voice blared: “Engaging target. Engaging target. Engaging—Contact lost.” Short seconds later the station was jolted again, though this blow was much weaker than the first.

“What happened?” Sandra yelled over the commotion. Agnarsson couldn’t answer. All he could see was that the camera feed on the south end of the observation tower had gone dead, while the one facing to the west showed movement: two gray shadows bouncing on the waves, long frothy wakes stretching out behind them.

“The boats are coming,” he said.



It took more than an hour for the Argentine boarding parties to land and sweep the upper decks of the refuge, and Agnarsson, who watched most of it on camera, found their pace agonizing. They moved painstakingly through every corridor and compartment, turning over beds and tables and ransacking closets. He watched impotently as they set demolition charges on the remaining autocannon turret and rolled grenades into the lifeboats, but not once did they destroy one of the cameras. Whether it was an oversight or done with intent to demoralize the survivors, he couldn't know, but more than once he saw marines look into the cameras through the eyeholes of their knitted face masks.

And now, at last, the Argentines were at the door. Their time had run out and no one had come to the rescue.

Agnarsson withdrew toward the rear of the room, knelt behind the blockade of heavy cabinets and bunks that they'd turned over for cover and to deflect grenades. He spared a glance back at Horacio and Sandra Vietes, watched their lips move with whispered prayers. Horacio squeezed his daughter's hand and then took up his rifle, kissed her on the forehead, and stepped toward the blockade.

"Stay behind me," Agnarsson said. "Stay with your daughter."

Horacio's eyes did not move from the armored door, which rang with the incessant banging of hammers and grinding of metal. The muffled voices of the Argentines could be heard through the door calling for explosives. "It should be me up front," he said. "I set this in motion."

Agnarsson shook his head gently, patted him on the shoulder. The other man relented and took up his rifle in the corner of the room, his body shielding his daughter.

"They're going to blow the hatch. It's going to be loud, but don't panic." Agnarsson told them. "The second you see an arm or a leg through the breach, shoot it. Remember, they're going to have to come through a small opening one or two at a time, so we have the advantage. We don't need to run around, just stay low and stay behind cover. Sandra? There's no choke on that gun, so for God's sake don't fire from directly behind me, or you'll cut me to shreds."

Sandra nodded, then quickly turned to her father. "I love you, Papa. I'm not afraid."

Those were the last words Agnarsson heard before the world filled with smoke and thunder. The blast wave hit so hard that for a moment of stupefying fear he thought he'd taken a bullet in the chest. But he was still kneeling, still breathing, and his finger squeezed the trigger even before his conscious mind recognized the mass emerging from the smoke and dust as a human body. The body rocked backwards, lost its footing, and fell back through the ragged metal hole in the door that had just become visible. Another body came into view and he fired again.

Bodies. That's how he thought of them as he watched them fall: they were not living men, not the fragile vessels of human souls. At best they were actors in a play, and the crescendo of gunfire was the orchestra. The rifle at his shoulder was his violin, and each fret of the trigger the signal for another body to drop over. The drums rolled staccato behind and in front of him, the muzzle blasts and the tanging whip-crack of bullets cutting through the air, breaking and ricocheting off the walls. A hand grenade skipped off the cratered floor, bounced back from the barricade and exploded, the crash of cymbals, and then the orchestra went quiet.

No, it went on playing, only he couldn't hear it anymore. He felt the beat go on in his chest, in his vibrating skull. He could taste metal, felt hot blood running down his cheek. He was on his back. He rolled onto his knees, grabbed the rifle and tried to steady his arms enough to swing it into position.

There was a short pile of bodies at the breach. Limbs thrust out from behind cover, dragging one of the fallen back through the door. Another grenade rolled in and this time Agnarsson threw himself to the deck. The blast slammed the cabinet back into his side and the metal bit into his arm.

Behind him he saw Horacio and Sandra flattening themselves against the bulkhead as bullets cratered all around them. They were still firing when suddenly Horacio spun like a top and flopped face down onto the deck. Agnarsson groped for his rifle, brought it back to his shoulder and peeked over the rim of the barricade, but he could no longer see the blown open hatch or the stack of bodies. There was smoke everywhere, smoke that seared his throat and made him clamp his eyes shut in pain. He tried to slow his breathing, but he kept gagging. He rolled to his feet to get away from the suffocating cloud but crashed on his side almost instantly. The pain in his right leg was so excruciating that it felt surreal, like it had disconnected his mind from his body; his own scream sounded distant through his burst eardrums. The world spun away vertiginously and he screamed no more.





## VI

The first time Agnarsson awoke, he was gasping for air, and every breath made him want to vomit. His mouth and throat burned unbelievably. Someone in black boots and camouflage fatigues leaned over him. He realized dimly that the man was tying a tourniquet around his leg. The man moved to push Agnarsson down, but he had already flopped back onto the deck. There was no strength left in him, and he passed out again.

When he awoke the second time, he was in the open air, staring up at the sky and the strange sight of an aircraft's empennage jutting from a ruined wall. It took him a little while to realize that he was on the deck of the refuge, staring up at the observation tower. He was baffled by what he saw until he remembered the drone and the second crash; the laser must have shot it down.

Agnarsson turned his head and looked around. The deck was strewn with rubble and a lot of men with submachine guns and shotguns stood around him. He was on a litter, and his wrists were tightly bound behind the small of his back. Above his knee, his right leg was in agony, but below it, he felt nothing. There was no sign of Sandra or her father. He moaned in pain.

"He's awake!" someone said above him, in Spanish. Another man quickly strode over, cuffed him on the side of his head. "It's all over for you now."

The stationkeeper laid back, kept quiet, and tried not to think. He wished he could pass out again, but he found himself eavesdropping on the conversations of his captors. His ears still rang, and it was hard to hear them distinctly, but he heard a woman's voice. Her words were every bit as harsh and contemptuous as the men around her. Sandra was still alive. His heart could have burst with joy.

'Still alive,' he thought, 'but for how much longer?'

He laid there for what seemed like a very long time until the blaring of a loud horn drew his attention. Gradually, the sleek hull of the Argentine corvette powered into view, not more than 300 yards off the refuge's port side. At first he thought it was coming alongside to expedite the transfer of the boats, but it didn't stop; it accelerated. The marines on deck made a lot of commotion, some asking aloud what was happening, others swearing nervously.

Agnarsson watched, mystified, as a canister rocketed high and straight from *Furibundo's* deck. It exploded into a cloud of glittering smoke. It was chaff: metallic debris meant to confuse radar, and it could mean only one thing.

The horn was blowing again, and over the din Agnarsson could hear the ringing of the ship's collision alarm. The ship rose out of the water, elevated on the skids of its hydrofoils, the sea churning madly under her hull. Suddenly there was a keening whistle overhead, and all the marines that surrounded him threw themselves to the decks, leaving him an unobstructed view as a volley of flaming darts slammed into *Furibundo*. The missiles struck her amidships, right at the funnel, and that whole part of the superstructure disappeared in a rising ball of fire. When the corvette's hull slammed back into the water, she broke in half. The section forward of the impact kept on moving ahead for a little while before it heeled over, but the aft end reared out of the water until it was almost perpendicular to the surface, and then in another heartbeat it disappeared.

Agnarsson couldn't believe it, and judging by the torrent of expletives that went up from the Argentine marines and sailors on the refuge, neither could anyone else. One of them actually turned to him, his hands folded over the top of his head and his face a mask of confusion and horror. "What the hell just happened?" he asked.

Not ten minutes later the man received his answer as a dark shadow swept over the deck of the refuge. Agnarsson squinted up, instantly recognizing the blue on white color scheme of the zeppelin

and the ensign of the Aviation Bond Corporation. Through a loudspeaker, voices in English and Spanish commanded: “Attention Argentine sailors, this is the *MB Etheridge*. Throw your weapons over the side and lie face down on the deck, or you will be fired upon!”

Someone had come to the rescue after all.

## VII

Agnarsson laid a flower beneath the white concrete cross engraved with the name of Horacio Vietes, then turned his gaze down the green hillock toward the gray, stormy waters of Autumnfrost Harbor. "I'm sorry he didn't get to see Avonshire," he said.

"He wouldn't have liked it here. He never liked living on land," Sandra said. "We buried him at sea. Some anonymous person paid for the marker to be put up here. For the rest of my family, too." She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Agnarsson said nothing.

"Whoever it was," she went on, "I'm glad for it. It makes me feel like they're not so far away."

"That's good," he said. "You should stay here, then. Keep them close."

Sandra Vietes laughed as she pushed the wheelchair back to the paved pathway. "You're relentless, Justin. Don't think I didn't notice you haunting my steps from afar. Everyone is very concerned to keep me from going back to the Raft. Even Lady Samantha checked in on me."

"You can't fault me for that. I'm just a crippled stationkeeper, not the class of person that hobnobs with the Marchioness of Avonshire."

"Except that she's hosting a dinner in your honor tonight, of course."

"Aristocrats will make any excuse for a soiree," he said dryly.

They continued along the path, eventually coming to a spot where the soft turf ended abruptly in a wide, rocky promontory that jutted into the South Atlantic. The pair was silent for a long while, watching the ships motor in while farther off bolts of lightning streaked from cloud to cloud.

At last, Sandra spoke. "Well let me finally put you at ease. I'm not going back to the Raft or Argentina. The *Colorados* don't seem to need me. And I think I owe you."

Agnarsson reached across his shoulder and clasped his hand over hers. "I'm relieved," he said.

Sandra set the brakes on the wheelchair and sat down on the margin of the grass, facing him. "And what about you? Are you going back once you're healed, or is your job done now that you've saved civilization - and a stupid child - from the forces of barbarism?"

"Did I really say all that?" He laughed in embarrassment. "Well, I'm sure there's always a stupid child that needs saving somewhere. But civilization?" The smile faded from his face and he slowly shook his head. "I'm not sure it can be saved."

Sandra brushed back her blowing hair, met his eyes, and said, "I am."

## Looking for More?

Thank you for reading *House of Refuge*! We hope you'll continue to read the Appendix and explore the background of our Ascension Epoch universe in some more detail, but before you do, we wanted to invite you to stay in touch with us by [joining our email list](#).

When you join, you'll receive a free short story, an update whenever we release a new book and weekly updates from our website. And on our website, you'll find all sorts of interesting articles, exciting new artwork, and some nifty merchandise.

If you enjoyed *House of Refuge*, we recommend you check out [Salamander Six](#), another Ascension Epoch short story of heroic adventure. It features a similar sort of near-future science fiction feel, and the same themes of responsibility, courage, and liberty.

*Salamander Six* is the tale of veteran firefighter Florian Archambeault, whose company, Marin-Pyronef, uses drones and VTOL aircraft to save lives and douse blazes that conventional firefighters couldn't handle. Now, he is called to make an impossible rescue that would vindicate his lifetime of work.

But there's a problem.

The man he must save is the despised ex-ruler of the island, and the man who nearly destroyed him twenty years ago.

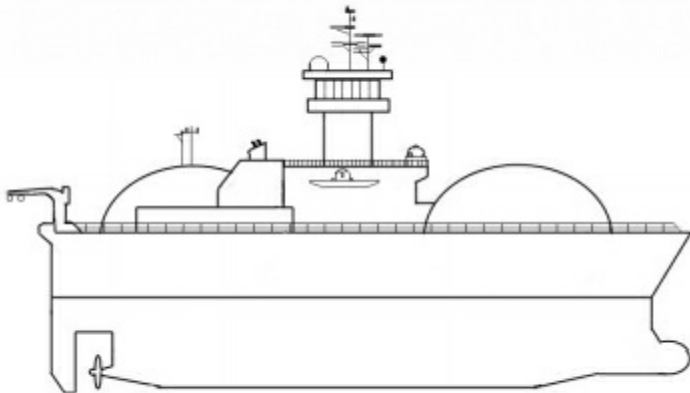
Will he do his duty or seek revenge? Can he afford to save the man that everyone wants dead? Find out.

# Appendix

## House of Refuge #49

House of Refuge #49 was a sanctuary seastead operated by Atlantic Littoral in the South Atlantic Ocean. She was commissioned on March 19, 1990. Originally intended to serve on the Pacific side of the Nicaragua Canal, she was redeployed to serve the growing Plata Raft off the southeastern coast of South America. The refuge's first stationkeeper was Andre Van Hoof, a veteran lifesaver with twenty-two years of experience and credited in over 200 rescues. The refuge was named *Sweet Surcease* by Van Hoof, and christened by his wife on May 1, 1990, the first day of their embarkation.

Architecturally, *Sweet Surcease* was a variation of the prolific *Salvador* class. Like the other refuges of her type, she had a modified SWATH (Small Waterplane Area Twin Hull) hull with a length of 210 feet and a beam of 93 feet. She was semi-submersible for superior protection in storm-wracked seas. Her above-decks were dominated by fore and aft weather-resistant dome structures that contained the quarters, galley, primary medical facilities, and ship's stores. The observation tower was situated amidships between the domes. *Sweet Surcease* featured a wider well deck than earlier entries in the class in order to accommodate more lifeboats, and had its own 25 foot motor launch. The refuge's diesel engines could develop a maximum of 15 knots.



### ***Salvador*-class Sanctuary Seastead**

- Length: 210 ft.
- Beam: 93 ft.
- Displacement: 3,400 T
- Top Speed: 15 knots
- Crew: Usually 3+\*
- Refuge Capacity: Sufficient beds and sanitary facilities for 56 passengers, with enough provisions to maintain that number, plus crew, for two weeks, although arrivals are usually removed by aircraft or boat within 24 hours. In a dire emergency, more can be crammed below decks or accommodated above decks in temporary shelters.

*\*A note on crew complement*

The Salvador class were originally envisioned to have a crew complement of 12, including a full-time doctor, rescue swimmer, and engineer. However, Atlantic Littoral soon found that the pay and maintenance for the crew represented the highest operating costs. Moreover, once the refuge was moored, there was little for most of the crew members to do. As a result, the class went through several redesigns to maximize automation, most significantly the replacement of the doctor with automeds and remote surgical systems. Efficiency gains were such that, once the refuge was in position, a single stationkeeper could effectively handle the day to day operations.

Practically, however, that single crewman represented a potentially catastrophic point of failure, especially in dangerous waters. Many qualified stationkeepers were also unwilling to pull a lengthy tour alone. As a result, refuges usually had a full-time crew of three or more, except in locations with a high incidence of piracy or when temporarily expanded in periods of catastrophe. Often, the crew complement was made up of the stationkeeper's family, which provided considerable cost savings to Atlantic Littoral and a far better quality of life for the stationkeeper. There are still occasions when a refuge is operated by the stationkeeper alone, though only for a short duration (1-2 weeks, at most). When a refuge is navigating under its own power for a distance of more than 100 nautical miles, company policy requires a minimum crew of 8. However, most transits are done with the refuge in tow by another vessel, eliminating this requirement.

# **Atlantic Littoral**

Atlantic Littoral is a private company that specializes in marine rescue and property recovery. Since its founding in 1964, its lifesavers have saved over 10,000 lives imperiled on the high seas, and its marine engineers and salvage experts have recovered over \$15 billion in lost property. The company provides its services on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the Baltic, Caribbean, and North Sea, as well as the western part of the Mediterranean. It serves both direct subscribers, such as international shipping lines and sea-based industrial platforms, and the general public, in which case its fees typically come from insurance providers.

Atlantic Littoral operates over 150 manned lifesaving stations and houses of refuge, some on the coasts and others afloat, along with a fleet of aircraft, surface vessels, and submarines. The elite Atlantic Littoral Emergency Rescue Teams (ALERT) specialize in disaster relief, anti-piracy missions, and afloat medical emergencies, and can respond to a crisis anywhere in Atlantic Littoral's areas of operation within ten hours.





# Aviation Bond Corporation

Everywhere known simply by its three-letter abbreviation, the ABC is the most prominent of several private organizations concerned with ensuring the safety and smooth flow of air traffic. Established in 1928 as the Aviation Bond Corporation, the ABC began its life issuing surety bonds for airlines involved in the then-new business of aerial cargo hauling. Within a year, they expanded into insuring the aircraft themselves (the far lower premiums they and their contemporaries charged for dirigibles, which were then far safer and more reliable than their heavier-than-air competition, have often been cited by aviation historians as one of the most significant impediments to the widespread adoption of airplanes in long-haul commercial flight), their cargo and passengers.

With indemnities usually very high for fatal crashes or collisions, the ABC, like many of its competitors, soon began requiring their policyholders to adhere to strict requirements of log keeping, particularly with regard to maintenance and crew training and restfulness, as well as to submit to regular inspections to insure compliance. In this manner, the ABC became a *de facto* standards organization for air safety. Through their painstaking investigations of traffic incidents, the ABC contributed much insight to improve aeronautical engineering and to the establishment of aircrew training programs and best practices which are still adhered to by all of the world's quality piloting schools.

At the same time they were policing quality of equipment and personnel in the air, the ABC was at the forefront of introducing modern principles of ground-based air traffic control. In 1936, they began accrediting schools for traffic controllers and requiring that all ground stations and air fields used by their policyholders meet the strict ABC standards. Among its most important innovations in this regard were the establishment of English as the common language of air travel and the standardization of radio frequencies and signal lights. It is by this avenue that the ABC started to transform into the vastly influential supranational entity usually thought of today; many governments sought its expertise in developing their aerial infrastructure and the ABC in turn used its leverage to open up unrestricted air corridors. By the end of the '40s, control towers, beacons, and other aids to navigation were regularly constructed so as to comply with ABC recommendations and inspected by ABC technicians. They ABC also began issuing its own air route maps, updated on the quarter, in the late 30s. In 1944, the ABC established its own meteorological bureau, using a combination of its own installations and data integrated from third parties. In 1965, the ABC became the first company to underwrite a commercial space flight, and its operations in orbit – and beyond – soon mirrored its concerns in the atmosphere.

The first of the ABC's famous Mark Boats, originally specialized dirigibles tasked with the rescue and recovery of passengers and cargo from stricken aircraft and crash sites, flew in 1947, rendering assistance in high risk areas, particularly over the oceans. The service inspired dozens of books, movies, and television dramas over the years. Their portrayals of Mark Boat skippers making daring high seas rescues and repelling hijackers and air pirates captivated the imagination a way that the technical tedium of pilot certification and air traffic control protocols never could, making the rescue service a tremendous public relations asset and the most well-known face of the organization. In the '50s, floating Mark Boats were supplemented by charted sea craft, and fixed and rotary wing patrol craft finally joined the ranks in 1962.

## **Inspiration**

The Aviation Bond Corporation is the Ascension Epoch adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's Aerial Board of Control, which appears in his two science fiction books, With the Night Mail and As Easy As ABC, both of which are in the public domain in the US. In the Ascension Epoch, the ABC is reimagined as an insurance company that spread out into air traffic control, meteorology, anti-piracy, and rescue services to protect itself from losses

# Clades and CAMERA

A Clade is an association of people united by a shared language, religion, ethnic background, or some other common bond, that is accorded special legal recognition in international law. Clades are recognized as having a limited form of sovereignty that encompasses not a geographical location, but the body of its membership. As a result, the members of a Clade are guaranteed certain rights and privileges when living or traveling in territory controlled by another government, rights and privileges that may not be available to other foreign nationals or even citizens. Most Clades control no territory in and of themselves, property only being owned by its constituent members, though a few administer recognized enclaves or land leased from other countries, and a few act as extraterritorial extensions of an existing sovereign state.

Membership criteria varies by Clade, but it is usually formalized, and the requirements are often far more stringent than those for citizenship under a traditional state. A Clade might qualify its members based on an immutable factor like ancestry, or a significant life achievement such as a level of religious initiation, or relatively trivial factors like commitment to a certain hobby or profession. In most cases, a variety of requirements must be met. It is very rare for a Clade to allow birthright membership. Instead, membership is almost always voluntary – a person must explicitly request membership; and discretionary – the Clade reserving the right to refuse admission under the terms of its charter. The most widely recognized and influential Clades are usually those with the strictest membership criteria. Clades often require some sort of commitment to maintain membership in good standing, although the form of this varies widely. This might be a percentage of income (or regular tithing for religious Clades), fixed membership dues, pre-arranged stints of public service, or religious pilgrimage/hajj.

There is not a single set of rights and privileges granted to Clades the world over, and likewise recognition is not automatic. A state (or another Clade) will choose or choose not to recognize a Clade just as they do with other governments. If a Clade is recognized, the government of that country will enter into negotiation with delegates from the Clade to decide just what sorts of benefits will be extended to Clade members in that territory. Most often this involves minimum guarantees of due process, such as freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment; access to Clade officials in times of distress; and expedited processing of travel visas and customs. More substantial privileges are not unheard of, such as immunity from taxation or the right to be tried only according to the laws of one's Clade, a condition resembling diplomatic or consular immunity. So-called 'Professional Clades', which are usually centered around a common occupation, are usually more concerned with freedom to practice their trade where it is otherwise restricted due to monopolies or licensing. A variant of this model are 'Service Clades', like Doctors Without Borders, which negotiate for free travel and conduct only in certain situations, such as natural disasters or humanitarian emergencies.

The larger and more influential a Clade is, the more concessions it can extract out of other states and Clades. A few of the largest Clades have populations and economic power that dwarf many nation-states, and some wield significant military power. Sometimes, smaller Clades associate themselves with these more influential Clades to gain better outcomes for their members. These 'parent' Clades, often called Macroclades or Super Clades, treat members of the microclades as if they were their own members. This is beneficial where a smaller Clade might not be recognized in a

certain territory, but the Macroclade is, so they would have all of the rights and privileges available to members of the Macroclade.

Clades grew out of the global reordering that followed the Martian Invasion, where many of the large, centralized states were destroyed and whole peoples scattered from their homelands. As many of these countries tried to reconstitute themselves in the two decades that followed, they had a great deal of difficulty extending their rule over people who, while currently inhabiting territory they asserted sovereignty over, held no historic or cultural ties or even languages in common. And while the nation-state might have broken down, nationalist feeling remained powerful. The Clade was an adaptation of that concept to this more decentralized age; by recognizing the autonomy and rights of these communities, the rebuilding countries were avoiding internal unrest or irredentist wars that none of them could afford.

**The Compact Francophonie** is usually recognized as the first Clade (though others have argued that the Sovereign Military Order of Malta fits this criteria just as well. Anticipating the Compact by over a century, it lacked its own territory for almost the same amount of time – control over Malta was reasserted by the Order in 1903 – but was still widely recognized as sovereign). The Compact was centered around metropolitan France and included displaced Frenchmen throughout Europe and French-speaking colonies in North America and Africa. Backed by a recognized state and flexing formidable muscle in the realm of commerce, its recognition by other countries established the precedent other Clades would follow.

Although beginning as a novel solution to the problems of a particular time in Europe and Asia, the influence of Clades did not diminish throughout the century. On the contrary, and despite the best efforts of the states they dealt with, Clades greatly expanded their political and economic clout over the decades. The number and significance of Clades exploded between the early 1950s through the late '80s, as rapid improvements in transportation and telecommunications – and especially the proliferation of Grid access in the '70s – allowed more people to become highly mobile and sell their labor around the globe. The decentralized model offered by Clades was ideal for this new paradigm.

In 1982, the confusing and convoluted body of international Clade law led to the creation of **CAMERA** – the Common Accords on Mediation, Extradition, Restitution, and Arbitration – a framework for settling legal disputes between Clades or between Clades and other states. CAMERA provides rules for settling criminal cases and torts in situations not covered under existing agreements, oversight of legal proceedings, and third-party arbitrators. Most countries and Clades in the current day have signed onto CAMERA, and its protocols are increasingly used even to settle conflicts between states as an alternative to warfare or the ponderous proceedings of the World Court

# Avonshire

Avonshire is an artificial island and settlement 190 miles off the northeast coast of Brazil in the Atlantic Ocean near the equator. The island is privately owned, though it is in allegiance to the British Crown-in-Exile. The island's current owner and governor is Lady Samantha Paulet, Marchioness of Avonshire, a hereditary peer of the Britannia Clade.

Avonshire was the work of Christopher Paulet (1926-1980), a wealthy Anglo-American oil magnate and visionary engineer. Paulet was involved in the massive project to dam the Congo River and create the African Interior Sea. His experiences there inspired him to support even larger engineering projects, including a scheme to close the Straits of Gibraltar. Called 'the Prophet of Geo Engineering', Paulet founded the Terra Nova Engineering Company to build the equipment and skills necessary for such a project. The company was notably involved in land reclamation projects in the Netherlands and Burma, where he co-developed a process for stimulating the rapid growth of coral for use in submarine construction, a material dubbed 'Seament.' In 1973, he purchased a perpetual lease for development of a seamount (an undersea mountain) off the coast of Brazil. Over the next five years, a construction project supervised by his son, Jamison, built up the seamount using Seament and other materials until it broke the surface, creating an atoll of approximately 19 square miles. Paulet began to solicit residents to settle the new island they called Avonshire, irritating the government of Brazil, which assumed the lease would be for the extraction of mineral resources.

New developments and settling were well underway when, in 1983, Brazil revoked the lease and claimed ownership of the land. The dispute was taken up with CAMERA, with Terra Nova Engineering's claims being supported by Clade Britannia and the Compact Francophonie (which had its own plans for creating new islands near French Guiana), among others. While the dispute was ongoing, a party of Brazilian officials attempted to land on the island, but was forced off by local residents. In response, Paulet appealed for military aid from Britannia. Soon after, the Brazilian Navy attempted to capture the island in an amphibious landing, but the operation was aborted when both the assault ship and a cruiser were sunk by the submarines HMS Rover and HMS Odyssey. The disastrous expedition humiliated Brazil and led to a vote of no confidence and the dissolution of parliament in 1984. In the meantime, CAMERA arbitrators also ruled against Brazil, and the new government accepted a modest indemnity for the loss of their warships and agreed to withdraw all claims to the island.

In 1985, Jamison Paulet was granted the title Marquess of Avonshire by Queen Victoria II. Between then and Jamison's death in 2010, the island was expanded significantly, now encompassing almost 27 square miles. Significant cargo facilities were erected in Autumnfrost Harbor to serve the growing trade with seasteads and undersea resource extraction in the area. Currently, the island has a permanent population of 18,000, most being members of Clade Britannia.

## **About the Ascension Epoch**

Ascension Epoch is a shared universe for original fiction. It was originally created by Michael A. DiBaggio and Shell “Presto” DiBaggio as a setting for their superhero and adventure stories, built around an alternate history that incorporates many details from public domain literature, movies, and comic books. All of the stories, characters, and artwork are open source, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license, meaning anyone is free to reshare or create derivative works, even for profit, as long as they credit the original creators, link back to our site, and release their work under the same license. To learn more, please visit our website <http://www.ascensioneepoch.com>

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# Other Ascension Epoch Stories

## [Salamander Six](#)

*The island of St. Martin is the glittering jewel of the French Caribbean. When fire threatens its narrow streets and skyscraper-studded waterfronts, the daring airborne firemen of Marin-Pyronef answer the call. Their remotely piloted drones can suffocate flames before conventional fire engines could even roll out of the station, while their jumpcraft can drop rescuers onto the roofs of buildings that no ladder could reach. This is the vision that the company's founder, veteran smoke jumper Florian Archambeault, has spent the last twenty years building into a model of firefighting excellence.*

*Now, in a single afternoon, seventy years of domination by St. Martin's corrupt Colonial Administration comes crashing down. In haste to evacuate after a stunning military defeat, four people are trapped atop the administration headquarters by a raging fire. Locked in a safe room with their air supply running low, only one fire company has a chance to save them. This is the rescue that would make Marin-Pyronef's reputation on the world stage, and finally vindicate what Florian has spent a lifetime trying to prove.*

*But there's a problem.*

*Among those trapped is despised colonial commissioner Pascal Beaulieu, the man who ruined and exiled Florian two decades ago. Will Florian's sense of duty trump his thirst for revenge? Can he afford to save the most hated man on the island?*

## After Dark

*When he was five, Sebastian Pereira watched the Target beat up a bank robber. Ever since then, he's wanted to be a superhero. Now a teenager, he's chasing the dream. As the water-controlling psychic vigilante called Torrent, he prowls the streets of Pittsburgh, doing his best to right wrongs and keep his double life a secret. But life in the mask brings more challengers than he anticipated, and even dual superpowers aren't always enough. Besides facing down the street thugs, monsters, and madmen, he's got to master his hormones and keep his conscience. With help from his paranormally gifted crush and his thrill-seeker best friend, he just might make it — and they just might make the best superhero team in the Burgh.*

*The East End Irregulars are Pittsburgh's premier superhero team, but even they had to start somewhere. These stories follow the early days of the Irregulars, from their first battles with Miasma and the Global Parahuman Revolutionary Army to their troubled romances and moral dilemmas.*

## **Copper Knights and Granite Men**

*A pretentious super-powered musician; his ageless, techno-wizard adoptive father; and a radioactive commando walk into a museum — and find everyone turned to stone! But this is no joke! It's a sinister threat that only the Challenger Foundation, the World's Greatest Adventurers, can handle.*

*A witty and suspenseful superhero adventure that draws from the King in Yellow mythos and taps the secret occult history of North America, Copper Knights and Granite Men is the first book in the Challenger Confidential series.*

## **Population of Loss**

*The Martian onslaught has crushed earth's mightiest empires and reduced the great achievements of civilization to poisoned rubble, but mankind still endures.*

*From the ruins of England to the desolate American west, unexpected champions arise to confront a foe that has never yet known defeat, and the stakes are nothing less than the survival of the human race.*

*Population of Loss, the first volume in the Martian War Chronicles, contains four short stories of superheroes and paranormal menace set amid the carnage of the War of the Worlds.*

## About the Creators

Mike and Shell are a husband and wife team whose love for storytelling began with an early passion for superhero comics, SF/Fantasy novels, and role playing games. When they're not writing or illustrating, they can often be found hiking, building Legos, customizing action figures, or watching old horror movies. They live in St. Clair, Pennsylvania, along with their three dogs and two cats.



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