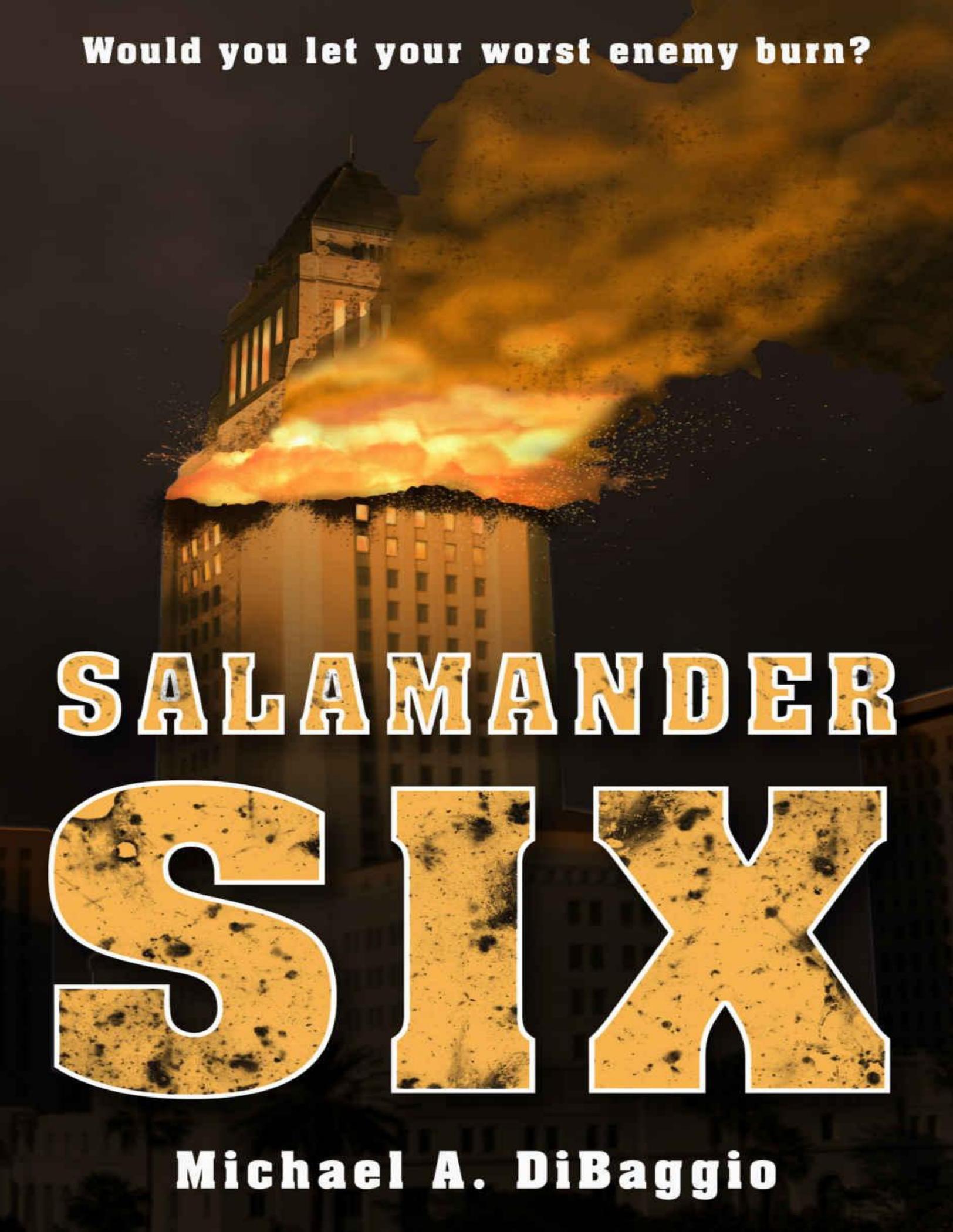


Would you let your worst enemy burn?



**SALAMANDER
SIX**

Michael A. DiBaggio

Salamander Six

by Michael A. DiBaggio

with

Shell “Presto” DiBaggio

First Printing

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Salamander Six

Florian Archambeault gazed down from his office window with tears in his eyes. Thirty feet below, people darted out onto the street, singly and in groups, throwing their hands in the air, jumping, shouting. He couldn't hear them through the glass, but he read their joy on their lips and in the tears that ran freely down their cheeks as they clasped their hands toward heaven. The drivers they stopped honked their horns, not in anger, but in celebration. Some motorists who were blocked by the steadily growing throng dismounted their mopeds and ran to hug total strangers.

He turned away from the window, fixing his attention on the television as it replayed similar scenes from all across the island. The banner at the bottom of the screen—uncharacteristically reticent for a news broadcast—read simply “Reaction in St. Martin.”

For more than 70 years, the once-divided island of St. Martin had been consolidated under French rule, one of the Compact's few territorial gains from its disastrous war against the *Wotanreich*[\[1\]](#). The French Colonial Authority had proved so inept and corrupt that it had achieved what military conquest never could: the unity of both the Dutch and French populations in opposition to it. Two hours ago, the Authority's hated yoke had been abruptly and unceremoniously thrown off when a Pelagian submarine squadron scuttled the Francophone fleet off Guadalupe. The Colonial Authority was evacuating the island.

The exiled Frenchman, still lean and sturdy despite his half-century, clapped his hand over his mouth to steady his quivering chin. It was not enough to stop his outburst, only transform it. He blinked away the tears, and his blue eyes lit up with joy as he laughed. He went on laughing, pounding his fist on the sideboard as he poured himself a glass of Chambord in celebration. Florian lifted the glass high and toasted. “Speedy departure, Commissioner! And good riddance!”

But the moment the alcohol touched his lips, his phone rang. He recognized the buzz of his own dispatch office. With a flick of his other wrist, he muted the television and piped the call through.

“Chief, we have a strange call on the emergency line. They're asking for you specifically.”

“Eh? Who the hell is it?” Florian replied, setting the drink down.

“Well, he says it's *Sous-Préfet* Rimbart. It is showing up as a government line.”

Florian's gunmetal gray eyebrows crawled halfway up his magnificently domed forehead. “Well, that's different. Put him through.” He thought for a moment how to greet his august caller, and decided that a simple hello wouldn't do. “Good day, Sub-Prefect!” he said, rather pointedly.

“Forgive my haste, Monsieur Archambeault, but our situation is urgent, as I'm sure you're aware. A fire has broken out at the colonial administration in Marigot, and several of our staff are trapped on the upper floors, Commissioner Beaulieu among them. I urged him to flee immediately after we had word of Guadalupe, but he insisted on staying to oversee...”

Despite being in haste, Sub-Prefect Rimbart went on at length commending the dutiful attentions of his boss, though Florian heard almost nothing after his mention of the commissioner. Bile rose in his throat, and he thought, ‘Of course it would happen like this.’ He could almost hear God laughing.

“This is all news to me,” Florian finally said. He looked at the television and, sure enough, there was video of the smoke pouring out of the *Tour de l'Unité*. It was easy enough to see where this conversation was heading, and he didn't like it. “But look here, that naval firefighting detachment at the harbor—”

“The rioters—those hoodlums—repelled them with bombs and gunfire! They've blocked the streets. The native *pompier*s stand idle. But I know that you, sir, are a loyal son of France—”

This time it was Florian that interrupted, and with a roar of laughter. “Indeed, *monsieur*?”

“The Republic calls for your aid, sir!” The Sub-Prefect’s voice was as shrill as a dog toy. “Will you answer?”

Florian got up and hurriedly tapped out a few instructions on the terminal for his crew. “The Republic can go to Hell,” he replied, “but I’ll answer the pleas of men in distress. But don’t think you’ll stick me with the bill, Rimbart. The administration has no subscription with Marin-Pyronef. I expect the emergency rate.”

“Your patriotism overwhelms, *Monsieur* Archambeault,” said the Sub-Prefect. “Of course, I must agree.”

“Yes, you must. Now tell me about this fire, and don’t spare the details.”

Florian had always been an impatient man, so it was equal parts curse and blessing that he worked in a profession where seconds meant lives. Ever since he founded *Marin-Pyronef*, his experiment in airborne firefighting, his focus had been on getting to the scene faster. But now, on the cusp of vindicating his life’s work, he waited.

As he paced the deck of the idling jumpcraft known as Salamander Six, Florian’s mind turned to survivor curves. The probability of surviving a fire depended on many factors, but the most fundamental was how long you spent amid the smoke and flames. The four people trapped on the 28th floor of the *Tour de l’Unité* were in an armored citadel equipped with emergency respirators, but those safeguards would only protect them for so long. Florian glanced up at the corner of his visor, watching the seconds of the holographic stopwatch race toward the actuarial certainty of their death, and he swore in a patois of three languages.

“If he’s not here in one minute, we do this ourselves,” Florian said.

Carel Visser, his only other companion in the cargo bay of the hopper, met his eyes and nodded grimly. Both men knew that there were good reasons why you did not make a hot drop into a burning skyscraper with fewer than three men: the mortality tables were as bleak as those of trapped victims. But in this job, the lives that mattered most were not your own, and there were risks that you had to take if you wanted to call yourself a fireman.

Besides Carel, Florian had four other firemen on call, men that he trusted and relied on. He knew that under normal circumstances, they would all have been ready, but these were not normal circumstances. The dispatcher could reach only one of those four over the jammed phone lines: Niels Linden, his most daring and junior fireman. Unfortunately, Niels was stuck in standstill traffic a half-mile away—and he was drunk. He had been celebrating in the streets with the rest of Philipsburg.

Florian was about to order takeoff when Niels lurched into the bay, covered in sweat and chomping on detox tablets.

Carel gave a cheer of welcome. “Corneille, you look like hell!”

It was common for the native Dutch to admonish each other by their Gallicized names, but Niels—whose legal name, according to the now-irrelevant Integration Statutes of the French Colonial Authority, was Corneille—was too happy or too intoxicated to be bothered by the insult. The brawny fireman collapsed onto the padded bench and began to strap his legs into the ceramic-and-steel struts of his exo-frame.

Florian gave the thumbs-up, and one of the flight crew raised the hopper’s aft ramp. The vibration from the engines intensified and the floor pressed up against his feet: the familiar sensations of takeoff.

Once the whine of the jumpcraft's ducted fans abated, Niels finally replied. "I may look like hell, but I feel like heaven! I was six beers in, drinking toasts to that Pelagian commodore when the alert came in. I had to batter my way through a crowd—"

For the first time, Niels spotted Florian, fully clad in the powered firefighting ensemble and already rigged into his drop harness. Niels' mouth promptly snapped shut and his eyes swiveled to Carel. "What's the old man doing here?" He tried to whisper, but Niels was still too drunk to have control over his volume.

"Old man?" Florian barked. A 33-year veteran who got his start battling brushfires in Septimania as a teenager, Florian fancied himself as fit and quick as any of his *pompiers aéronautiques*. And although he hadn't gone on a call in five years, he put himself through the same annual recertification as the rest of his employees. "I ought to dock half your pay for drinking on duty, you worthless *debiel*."

"But this is a historic day, boss!"

The old man grunted. It wasn't the way Niels meant it, but Florian couldn't agree more. He had been waiting 20 years for this fire.

It took no more than five minutes for the hopper to reach the city of Marigot. The aircraft circled 1,000 feet above the northwestern neck of the lagoon, the cabin windows looking down on the dense gray smoke billowing from the *Tour de l'Unité*, the 30-story skyscraper that housed the colonial administration and the headquarters for the Gendarmerie of the Caribbean.

Niels let out a low whistle at the spectacle. "That's a pretty sight." Like many others in his profession, Niels revealed an appreciation of fire that ran uncomfortably close to enthusiasm.

"Not for the people trapped inside," Florian said.

"I didn't mean it like that, boss."

"Didn't you? Well, what if I told you that one of them is Commissioner Beaulieu?" The chief looked like he'd bitten off a piece of gristle and was having a hard time swallowing it down.

Niels, shaking his head, fought off a grin. "I don't know. The way you snarl out his name, it sounds like *you* might be having second thoughts."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" In Florian's imagination, Niels was reading his darkest thoughts. His disgusted reaction to the commissioner had become so habitual that he no longer even noticed when he did it.

"Well, you hate him more than most," Niels said hesitantly. "That's a feat for this island. And now you have to save him. That's all I meant."

What Niels said was true. And why not? Beaulieu's name was already a curse on Florian's lips a decade before the commissioner ever set foot on St. Martin. The chief hated the bureaucrat before anyone on the island had even heard of him. But none of that mattered a damn bit. The job didn't allow for exceptions.

"Nobody said you have to like whose ass you're saving," the chief growled. "You just have to do it."

"We all know that, boss," Carel said, laying a hand on Florian's ceramic shoulder pad. "The only question I have is, what do we do once we get them out of there? There's a lot of people who want his head."

Florian grunted. That problem had not escaped his notice. Sub-Prefect Rimbart insisted that they

fly the survivors back to the naval depot at Grand Case, but Florian had considerable reservations about trusting the French government. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility for them to steal his aircraft and press him and his men to serve the evacuation. On the other hand, it was tough to imagine colonial bureaucrats safe anywhere else with the mood the island was in. He knew what sort of property damage likely awaited him if he tried to shelter the survivors at the fire station, even if he could come to terms with the idea of protecting Commissioner Beaulieu. Worse, that option could put his business in the crosshairs of the Pelagian armed forces if they wanted to capture Beaulieu, or even the French military if they decided to risk a rescue mission. The survivors were a hot potato.

"One problem at a time, Carel," the chief said.

The pilot's voice crackled over the loudspeaker: "Beginning approach. Make ready for drop." The hopper banked hard left, and even in their harnesses, the firemen had to grab the handholds to stay upright.

Florian dialed up an outside video feed and set it playing across his goggles. The view was from hundreds of feet below them, captured by one of the swarm of quadcopter drones trained on the blaze. Half of the island had launched their flycams for their own personal, glorious view of the carnage, though they were all—including the colonial administration's own vaunted fire department—perfectly helpless to do anything about it. The conflagration on the middle decks of the tower was too hot and extensive to push through from the ground, and the island's streets were too narrow and congested for large trucks to maneuver, even if any had ladders tall enough to reach the upper floors. Now, the victims' sole hope for survival rested with the three smoke jumpers aboard Salamander Six.

Already, two of the company's LV20 *pyronefs*, remotely piloted firefighting 'digs, cut through the drifting smoke, spraying thick bands of white foam onto the fire-gutted flanks of the building. Unlike most aerostat drones that relied on cheap—and potentially explosive—hydrogen to provide lift, the *pyronefs* relied on nothing at all: there was nothing but raw vacuum inside their laminate hulls. Without fear of combustion, their operators could drive them as close to the blaze as necessary to deliver their flame-suffocating payload with maximum effect.

Florian switched his camera feed to one of his *pyronefs*, watching the other 'dig gain altitude and hose down the observation deck in preparation for the firemen's landing. Cataracts of foam doused the isolated tongues of flame that licked out at the sky from the ventilation grates. The drone operators would be scanning the sizzling rooftop with infrared cameras; once satisfied that there were no more hot spots, they would radio the all clear to the hopper.

Inside the bay of Salamander Six, the red light flashed green and the rear ramp lowered. The firemen were buffeted with a burst of wind and smoke.

Florian slapped the lever that drove the hoisting boom out of the back of the aircraft and felt the line tug on his harness. "Down we go, gentlemen!"

The three firemen landed gracefully—even Niels, whose gyro-balanced leg struts compensated for his alcohol-induced wobble. They detached their lines and dashed across the rooftop to the service stairwell. Florian tore the heat-warped security door off its hinges with his hydraulic grapples and leaped away from the onrushing flame before Carel drove it back with a curtain of foam. His 200-pound tank lightened considerably by the release, Carel ducked his bulk through the threshold and took his first tentative step into the stairwell, probing the smoky darkness with his high-intensity shoulder lamp and thermal viewer.

"Flames down. All clear!" he said. The trio plunged into the darkness.

The firemen bounded down the stairwell, trusting in their e-frames' gyros to keep them from slipping on the foam-slicked steps. As they passed the doors to the 30th and 29th floors, the stairwell

was awash with the red and orange glow of the blaze, and they could hear the air whistling in from outside through the shattered windows. Beneath the blaring of the fire alarm, there was a constant, almost cozy, crackling sound, like a gigantic fireplace. When they reached the 28th floor, however, it was eerily quiet. There were no flames visible through the small portals on the door. Indeed, there was nothing visible at all; the smoke was completely opaque, like a blot of ink.

Carel, who was in the lead, halted at the doorway. "Boss, I don't think we want to open this door."

Florian was thinking the same thing. His thermal camera was showing temperatures far higher than the two floors above. The 28th floor was specially reinforced, and not just around the safe room. He recalled that there were no windows anywhere on this floor, the better to protect against intrusion and spying, or so he figured. Because of that, the fire might have already starved itself of oxygen. Though the flames would burn out, the trapped heat would build, and the furniture, the paint, all the combustible materials would continue to break down. The sudden inrush of air from opening the door could cause it all to explode.

"Back up one floor," he commanded. "Niels, get the drill ready. We'll ventilate vertically, then come back. And pray to God that there's still some air in that safe room."

Precious time was lost beating down the flames on the 29th floor, and still more as the hydraulic lance struggled to bite through the reinforced compartment beneath them. Their goal in ventilating the floor was to supply just enough oxygen to burn off the pyrolyzed fuel gasses without causing an explosion. The heat and smoke trapped in the floor below could then vent upwards into the open air, preventing a backdraft. But, like most of their work, it was more art than science. Even with their specialized sensors and gauges, there was no real way of knowing how much was "just enough." The cap on the drill formed a seal that prevented any air from getting in as they worked, but the moment they removed it, the smoldering fire would be able to breathe again. If they let in too much air too fast, they were in for a rough ride.

"Just say the word, boss," Niels said.

Florian stepped clear of the breach. "Ready for ventilation! Go!"

Niels disengaged the seal and leaped sideways. The floor buckled around the hole and a spearpoint of flame shot through the rupture, but there was no explosion. Niels and Carel cheered, but Florian brusquely cut them off. "Shut up and get that drill ready again! We've got no time to waste!"

In a few more minutes, they'd supplied enough air that the 28th floor was once again burning steadily. The three men hurried downstairs and breached the door, clearing a path through the flame-swept corridor with their foam cannons. The whole floor was a blackened ruin. Almost nothing remained that was recognizable. Plastic was melted in molten pools; furniture and workstations were reduced to mounds of twisted metal and ash. Even the wall panels were eaten away, revealing the steel skeleton of the building and, within that, the armored safe room. The firemen turned their sprayers on the few flames and hot spots that lingered around it, washing layers of charred thermal tile off its walls like leprous skin.

"My tank is empty," Carel said.

"Mine too," said Niels. "We'll have to rush through it if the fire kicks up again."

"That won't happen," Florian said. It was a note of optimism to encourage himself rather than a statement of confidence, and his men must have known it. Pushing through flames even in an E-Frame was risky, but doable. Their heat-resistant ceramic skin could take a lot of punishment. The survivors he hoped to be carrying back to the roof, however, could not.

He checked his watch. It had been more than 12 minutes since they landed. The survivor curve

was scraping zero.

“I’m glad something held up, at least,” Carel said, tilting his head toward the room. “Now how do we get in?”

“Presuming they didn’t lock it from the inside, we just open the door,” Florian replied. His gauntlets were already tightening on the door’s thick crossbars. He gave it a good yank, but it didn’t budge. “*Merde.*”

“And if they did?” But instead of waiting for a reply, Carel was already knocking on the wall, first with his grapplers and then with a mallet. The other men joined in, shouting in three languages for someone inside to open the door. There was no response.

“And if they’re unconscious?”

Florian strained as he pulled on the door, sweat dripping off his brow and stinging his eyes, his breath fogging his visor. “You know damn well what then! Shut up and help me pull!”

The three men threw their bionic might at the door, pulling on whatever protruding surface they could grasp. Both their own muscles and the motors of their E-Frames were taxed to their limits. It was futile.

“We’ve done the best we can,” Niels said, letting go of the door. He slumped exhaustedly in his exoskeleton, his visor fogged over from panting.

“Have you?” snarled Florian with utter contempt.

“It’s no use. The door is too strong, boss,” said Carel.

“You’ve put more effort into saving cats and dogs.”

Niels slammed his forearm against the wall of the safe room, and the whole place resounded with the clang. “Cats and dogs do not lock themselves in armored vaults! Fuck it! Cats and dogs do not destroy men’s lives!”

“Neither do we.” Florian crouched down and gripped the door once again. “Pretend they’re dogs if you have to, but you will get your asses against this door and pull.”

For all his stubbornness, the absurdity of the situation was not lost on Florian. The door was made to repel explosives and armed assault. It had withstood the fire. They were not going to be able to open it. He wondered what he was trying to prove, and to whom. Was it to protect his reputation, to ensure he would not be known as someone who let trapped men die over a grudge? Maybe he needed to gloat over Beaulieu, to make sure the commissioner knew he’d been defeated. Maybe it was just to see his foe’s dead body. The ‘whys’ didn’t much matter, but the fact that this damned door wouldn’t move did. Right now, there was nothing on earth that mattered to him more than breaking it down.

Incredibly, the hatch began to give. Slowly at first, a hiss of air and condensed water vapor bursting into steam as the seals broke, and then the grinding of the metal on the door’s yielding frame. Finally, an almighty bang as the bolts snapped and all three firemen collapsed on their backs, the heavy armored door on top of them. The three men cheered as they pushed the piece of bent steel off, elated at their impossible achievement. Maybe the door had not really been locked, but the heat had just caused it to seize; or perhaps the extreme heat in the room had helped them, warping and weakening the steel bolt until it could be snapped. Whatever the case, there was little time to wonder about it now. Inside the citadel were four prone bodies.

“O2 is good. I don’t think any smoke got in,” Niels said as he knelt down beside one of the victims. He gently pressed the pressure pad of his gauntlet against the man’s chest. “Weak and erratic, but his heart is beating.”

“This one’s alive, too,” Florian said, hoisting a woman across his shoulders. “It’s damn hot in here, probably just heat exhaustion. Let’s get them out, quick!”

The three men moved quickly to gather up the unconscious victims. It was Florian that found himself looking down at the moaning form of Commissioner Beaulieu, and the sight brought on a strange reverie. After two bitter decades, he was once again face to face with his nemesis. This devil in sharkskin and checkered necktie, the memory of whose sneering lip still made Florian clench his fist, whose imperious name and title made his mouth fill with bile, was after all nothing more than a frail and helpless old man. How easily his neck might be snapped by a careless twitch of Florian's mechanized gauntlets, or his vertebrae pulped beneath the tread of his exoskeleton! But now these thoughts seemed repugnant. His long-awaited vengeance, the schemes hatched in the hot-blooded brain of a younger, angrier man, were as nothing compared to the downfall that Beaulieu had authored for himself. Something close to sympathy gnawed at Florian's conscience. He frowned severely.

The fingers of Florian's gauntlet hooked the bureaucrat by his sweat-stained dress shirt and roughly hoisted him up. "This is more than you warrant," he whispered.

In short order, the three firemen emerged on the rooftop. The four victims were slung over the shoulders of the E-Frames, coughing and blackened with soot, but otherwise no worse for wear. The combination of the fresh, cool air and the jostling of their rush up the stairwell had revived them, and Florian and his crew quickly strapped them into rescue harnesses, by which they were hoisted up into the bay of Salamander Six. As the firemen waited for their turn to ascend, they decided that, after all, it had turned out to be a fairly by-the-book rescue, hardly worth the fuss that would be made of it. Carel and Niels averred that Florian had put them through tougher training scenarios.

Aboard the hopper, Commissioner Beaulieu had a different opinion, of course. He touched his quaking hand first to his heart and then to the insignia painted on the bulkhead of the hopper, the *Marin-Pyronef* logo with its proud motto: "*Vita Ab Alto*"—Life from Above.

"Thank God! Those separatists would have roasted us alive if not for you!" Beaulieu shouted.

The chief, who had been talking quietly with one of the flight technicians, glanced over at him. "Separatists, eh?"

"Certainly! A vile and inhuman deed worthy of such terrorists!"

Not that there weren't plenty in the mob who would have wanted to do just that, but Florian doubted they had anything to do with it. Since the fire broke out on the upper floors of the building, he thought it more likely that the cause of the blaze was a botched attempt to incinerate sensitive documents and equipment. Still, he let it pass without comment.

The commissioner went on: "Words cannot express how grateful we are for you gentlemen. And I tell you, the government of France will be grateful, too. You've done a wonderful thing not only for us, but for yourselves. You will be honored as Heroes of the Republic!"

Florian snorted as he wiped the sweat off his face. "Pariah to hero, just like that!"

"I beg your pardon? Never mind. I didn't get your name, *monsieur*. I guess that you commanded our rescue?"

"That's right. My name is Florian Archambeault. But don't you remember me?" The fire chief took pains to sound insulted.

"Oh, of course!" Beaulieu, the consummate politician, lied shamelessly. "Last year's Reunion Day celebration, on the Esplanade, wasn't it?"

"Long before that, I'm afraid. The Marseilles administrative court, almost 20 years ago now."

"I... am afraid I don't recall."

Florian roared with laughter. For years, he wondered if Beaulieu might have wrecked the lives of so many people, almost as a matter of course, that he genuinely would not be able to remember them all. Now, he knew that was true. It was absurd! It was grotesque! And now, at last, he found it

hilarious.

“Then let me remind you! You issued the injunction that shuttered my firefighting company—a venture much like this one—for interfering with the public provision of emergency services. It cost me my fortune and, for a while, my freedom. I fled to the Antilles to escape worthless bureaucrats like you. But you, accursed man, followed me here and got yourself set up as petty king! Now, *former commissioner* Beaulieu, isn’t that an interesting turn of events?”

Beaulieu recoiled as if from a blow, his drawn face gone pale. Everyone else in the jumpcraft’s hold was staring at Florian, just as they had been since the first booming note of his tirade. The colonial bureaucrats looked very nervous.

Only a moment later, Salamander Six banked to port. The hopper accelerated over the little villages and tangled knots of roadway and cast its shadow over the cerulean sea. The island was quickly receding to the south. The woman they pulled from the fire kept turning her head between the window and her associates, looking at them plaintively. When none of them spoke up, she anxiously asked, “*Monsieur*, are we not headed to Grand Case? Our evacuation plan called for—”

“Yes, *Monsieur* Rimbert told me all about it. He asked me to take you there. But as my crewman informed me a moment ago, the naval depot has just been overrun. Separatists.” Florian wore a whimsical smile as he added, “Shall we still attempt to land at Grand Case, *mademoiselle*?”

The woman gasped. Beaulieu would have bolted from his chair if he were not buckled in. “You can’t mean to turn us over to the rebels!”

“All that effort to pull you out of a fire just to hand you over to a lynch mob?” Florian scoffed. “Happily, I found another party who expressed interest in receiving you.”

“The Pelagians, then.” Beaulieu’s words rattled in his throat.

Florian stared at his nemesis, saying nothing, content just to watch the man tremble. It was a delightful game at first. But then Florian’s chest and shoulders heaved with a great sigh. After all this, vindictiveness seemed very exhausting and pointless.

“We’re going to Anguilla. The Atlantic Littoral station at Rendezvous Bay agreed to take you on until you can be repatriated. I imagine you’ll be more comfortable than former Sub-Prefect Rimbert, at any rate.”

“Bless you, *monsieur*!” the woman exclaimed as she clapped her hands together.

It was a display of emotion and gratitude that Florian thought altogether impossible of a bureaucrat. He chewed his lip and lay back against the headrest. His thoughts turned to that glass of Chambord still sitting on the buffet in his office. All was silent except for the whine of the turbofans.

On sleepy Anguilla, beneath the flag of the British Crown-in-Exile, there were no reporters or angry mobs to press in on them. Aside from an ambulance and a small fuel lorry, there was nothing to be seen at all except the huge, orange sun sinking into the white sand dunes. It was hard to believe that they were less than three miles away from home.

The passengers disembarked without commotion or fanfare, helped onto the tiny, uneven square of tarmac that made the entirety of the station’s airfield by the Atlantic Littoral corpsmen. Florian told his men to get out and stretch their legs. God knew they wouldn’t have quiet like this on St. Martin for a long time.

A few minutes later, as Florian stood alone in the scrub watching the sunset, Beaulieu approached him. “I remember your trial now, *Monsieur* Archambeault,” he said. “You had offended

powerful interests within the state, and they wanted an example made of you. It was a severe sentence, though I thought nothing of it at the time.”

Florian turned his head, looking down his nose at his old adversary. The deposed commissioner had buttoned his ruffled, sweat-stained shirt and did his utmost to stand up straight and confront Florian with dignity, though his legs swayed like rubber and his glassy eyes struggled to focus. The fireman’s eyes flicked away from the pitiful sight. At last, he grunted acknowledgement. “Why should you? You’ve passed down many such sentences, I’m certain.”

“Many,” said Beaulieu. “You scorned those powerful men, but I was inclined to serve them. Then I became a powerful man, and their interests became my own.”

“And now you have nothing,” Florian hissed.

“Just so, *monsieur*. Just so. Now you are the powerful man, or you will be one very soon. Men like you will rule the island now, and elsewhere, too. The world has changed.”

“No, not rule,” Florian said. “The world *has* changed. Men will no longer rule other men, but only themselves.”

A thin, patronizing smile crossed Beaulieu’s face. “The world has changed, but it has not changed that much.”

Florian clenched his jaw angrily. “You know the irony of all this is that you have probably ruined me a second time. They’ll say I was a sympathizer because I saved you and didn’t drop you off with the lynch mob. I’ll be lucky to still have any customers, let alone be a ‘powerful man.’”

Beaulieu’s smile faded and he lowered his head. There was no trace of smugness or mockery in his voice, now. “On the contrary. You will be the most beloved of powerful men: the kind that shows mercy to his enemies.

“Now that I am defeated, *Monsieur* Archambeault, I hope you will forgive me. In my maturity, I have had cause to regret many episodes of my youth. This is another.”

“Oh, that’s all right, Commissioner,” Florian replied sardonically. “I once vowed that if ever I had the chance, I’d let you die in a fire.” He raised a toast with a bottle of water. “Here’s to maturity!”

Looking for More?

Thank you for reading *Salamander Six*! 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.

Appendix

Marin-Pyronef

Marin-Pyronef is a private firefighting company specializing in the use of remotely piloted and VTOL aircraft. The company is headquartered on the island of St. Martin and provides service to several of the neighboring Leeward Islands as well as marine firefighting and rescue to shipping. The company operates on a subscription model, mostly supported by commercial and industrial customers.

While the use of aircraft in firefighting is not new, Marin-Pyronef was one of the first to utilize aircraft as the primary means of both fire suppression and rescue transport in an urban setting. The company was founded by Florian Archambeault, a French fireman with considerable experience as a ‘smoke jumper,’ or wilderness firefighter, who was frequently dropped into wildfire zones via transport plane. Archambeault thought the use of VTOL aircraft would greatly improve response time through crowded city streets, as well as provide a better means of assaulting blazes on the upper floors of skyscrapers. When his initial attempt at starting such a fire company was thwarted by French authorities, he immigrated to St. Martin and restarted his work there. He saw the island as an even better opportunity for his model, since its narrow and cluttered streets made it nearly impossible to operate large, wheeled fire engines. Additionally, his aircraft would be able to respond more rapidly to emergencies at sea than the island’s boat-based rescue services.

When Archambeault arrived in St. Martin, the island was undergoing a period of great commercial expansion, including the construction of high-rise resorts and office buildings. Many of these saw the advantage of Marin-Pyronef’s model over the existing government-organized fire service and became the company’s first subscribers. Soon after, the company won contracts with large insurance firms like the ABC^[2] and Lloyds of London to serve large cargo ships in the vicinity of the island.

The exact meaning of the company’s name is a source of some controversy, and Archambeault has given varying answers. *Marin* is French for marine, or sea-going, and probably refers to the company’s headquarters on the island of St. Martin and its service to shipping. However, *Marin* is also the name of a wet, southeasterly wind that brought rains to the regions where Archambeault previously battled wildfires, and thus many have suggested the name is a reference to that. *Marin* was also the alias of the famous French superhero and founding member of *Les Quatre Vents* (The Four Winds), one of the national heroes of the Martian War. Before the war, the Four Winds were themselves talent firefighters in the national service. Archambeault has been quoted several times speaking of his great admiration for *Les Quatre Vents*, and *Marin* in particular, leading to speculation that the company was named in honor of the hero.

The term *Pyronef* is a neologism coined by Archambeault, and refers to a lighter-than-air firefighting aircraft. In modern English usage, the word *nef* (itself a French word originally referring to a type of medieval seagoing ship) is typically used to describe aircraft that achieves lift by means of a gravity-negating drive powered by Cavorite. However, at the turn of the 20th century it referred to any sort of fast, lighter-than-air craft, including blimps and zeppelins. This older sense is still maintained in French, and in this case refers to the company’s drone dirigibles. Whereas most drone aerostats use cheap and efficient, but flammable, hydrogen, Marin-Pyronef’s drones are vacuum aerostats. While these are considerably more costly to construct, they have lower maintenance costs

over time and provide much longer loiter times. Of course, they also have the advantage of not exploding in close proximity to flame.

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.ascensionepoch.com>

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Other Ascension Epoch Stories

[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.

House of Refuge

Justin Agnarsson is station keeper and lone crewman of South Atlantic House of Refuge #49, a floating sanctuary for the thousands of mariners and seasteading families who live and work in the 350-mile long Plata Raft. Now, war threatens to bring an end to his lifesaving mission as an Argentine warship pursues a pair of refugees to the station. A house of refuge is supposed to be inviolable, but the Argentines are hell bent on their mission. Alone and virtually defenseless, Agnarsson faces an impossible choice between duty and survival. But when the brutality of war threatens to unravel the fabric of civilization, more than lives are at stake.

Second place winner of the 2014 Libertarian Fiction Authors/Students for Liberty Short Fiction Contest

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.

[1] The Great Eastern War (1929-1933) between Pan-Germanic Empire (or *Wotanreich*) on one hand and an alliance of Holy Russia, France, and the Papal States had no real winners.

[2] Aviation Bond Corporation, a la Rudyard Kipling's "Aerial Board of Control." See [House of Refuge](#).