

# BARREN ISLE

Allen M. Steele

**Allen M. Steele returns to our pages with a new adventure story set on Coyote. Allen's most recent book, *The Doppler Effect and Other Stories*, was published earlier in 2017 by Fantastic Books (trade paper) and Positronic Publishing (ebook).**

The toughest mission I ever had in the Corps of Exploration? No two ways about it: the search and rescue operation on Barren Isle. But it wasn't the chireep who gave us trouble, or even the kids. It was . . . well, maybe I better tell you about that.

In C.Y. 18—that's A.D. 2355 for those particular about using the Gregorian calendar—I was stationed at the Corps outpost in Hurricane Bay on Cherokee, a mid-size subcontinent in Coyote's southern equator. Our location on the Great Equatorial River put us as far away from the major settlements on New Florida, Midland, and Great Dakota as you could get. After you passed Hurricane Bay, there was nothing to the east except wilderness.

That didn't stop the settlers, homesteaders, and would-be heroes who'd been steadily coming that way for the last three years (about nine Earth years). In the short period in which the starbridge between Sol and 47 Ursae Majoris still existed, hundreds of thousands of immigrants fled Earth for Coyote. The starbridge was blown up by a religious fanatic in C.Y. 17, but not before refugees swelled the population of the existing colonies. New Brighton became an overcrowded slum and Shutlefield wasn't much better, and before long the more adventurous—or foolhardy, as the case may be—gathered their belongings, banded together, and lit out for the frontier. *Go east, young man*, as Horace Greeley once said, or something like that.

Sometimes they were successful, but other times they got in trouble. And when that happened, me and the Desperados came in.

Hurricane Bay was an inlet just east of the central meridian. It was where the Exploratory Expedition of C.Y. 17 sheltered during a typhoon, and a permanent outpost was established there just a year later—three by Earth reckoning; do you understand now why the LeMarean calendar is preferred?—not long after the Corps was formed. Its purpose was twofold: support the continuing exploration of this side of the world, and come to the aid of explorers and settlers when necessary.

The latter was my job. That's why I went to Barren Isle. And after I got back, I swore I'd never go there again.

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I was on my way over to the mess hall for breakfast when a young sergeant came jogging up to tell me that I was wanted in HQ at once. "Briefing with the Old Man in five minutes," Clark said. "SAR op . . . sounds major."

Search and rescue operations are always major when lives are on the line, but I

didn't say that. Jack Clark's chevrons were still fresh on his uniform, and every SAR mission was a big deal. The Old Man was Sawyer Lee, a former wilderness guide whom President Montero had given the military rank of general and named as the Corps' commanding officer not long before the president was killed in the same terrorist bombing that destroyed Starbridge Coyote. A kid like Jack was apt to be impressed with Lee, and I suppose I was, too . . . just not enough to hurry. I borrowed a few minutes to fetch coffee and a Danish before walking over to the HQ conference room.

Lee didn't notice that I was a little late. He was at the Corps central command in Shuttlefield, eleven hundred miles away on New Florida. The conference room was equipped with a holo, so when the briefing began, he simply materialized at the head of the table, a tough-looking, middle-aged black man with a thick mustache. If the pickup lens caught me occasionally nibbling at my pastry, he didn't notice or care. More likely the latter, if the mission was as big as Clark said it was.

"Sorry to call you on such short notice," Lee said, "but something has come up that we need to act on a-sap." His voice was slightly fuzzed, his image sparkling with firefly-like distortions; the holo had just recently been installed. "An emergency sat-phone transmission has been received from a location in your range of operation. You need to dispatch an SAR team immediately."

Everyone looked over at Col. DeSoto. Damaris DeSoto was base commandant, and although there was no doubt that we'd take the job—in the Corps, no one refused SAR ops—it was her job to speak for us.

"Of course, General. We can have a squad ready to go in—" she darted a look at me and I silently raised a finger—"one hour, as soon as my team leader assembles his crew."

Sawyer nodded, then looked in my general direction. I put down my Danish and didn't touch it again. "That's Lt. Gomez, isn't it? Eddie, an hour may be too long . . . do you think you can live up to your nickname?"

I tried to suppress my grin. Fast Eddie was what I was called in the Corps; everyone knew I could get an SAR team in a gyro and off the ground while other guys were still packing their gear. I was proud of that handle and flattered that Lee used it. "No sweat, sir. We'll be wheels up as soon as the meeting is done."

As I said this, I glanced down the table at Clark. He belonged to SAR Team 4 and didn't have to ask what I meant when I caught his eye: *alert the Desperados, tell 'em we're moving out*. Without a word, he reached into a pocket, pulled out a pad, and began tapping out a flash message. For their sakes, I hoped none of the others were still in their bunks.

"That's good," Lee said, "but don't rush out before you hear the rest. This mission has got some . . . well, special problems."

He paused to tap at his own pad, and the wallscreen beside the conference table lit to display a global map of Coyote. Two thin red lines, vertical and horizontal, were superimposed above the center of the map. Their point of convergence floated a few inches to the right and down until it was directly above a small island just a few degrees north of the equator, almost directly at the meridian.

"The coordinates for the beacon are 5.2 degrees North, 3.1 degrees East," Lee said. "I don't think I have to tell anyone where that is."

Just in case his meaning wasn't clear, the map reminded us by zooming in on the island. Everyone in the room reacted the same way: a sharp intake of breath, a widening of the eyes, a grunt of surprise. Next to me, Hurricane Bay's senior physician, Don Stark, shook his head.

"Oh, hell," he muttered. "Barren Isle."

That's when I knew the mission was going to be a bitch. Lee couldn't have heard

Doc Stark, but he must have seen the expressions on all our faces. He slowly nodded, his face grim.

*“Yeah, you’re going to Barren Isle,” he said, “and that’s not the half of it. Here’s what we’re up against. . . .”*

\* \* \*

If you’re not familiar with the LeMarean calendar, then it’s probably safe to assume that you haven’t heard of Barren Isle either, and therefore aren’t aware of its singular place in the history of human colonization of Coyote. So I’m going to take a minute to get you up to speed . . . feel free to skip this part if you think you’ve heard it already.

Barren Island is a pyramid-shaped piece of land, no more than 350 miles across at its furthest width, with the Midland continent to the west and the slightly smaller island of Hammerhead to the east. It’s surrounded by three waterways: the Midland Channel, the Short River separating it from Hammerhead, and the Great Equatorial River to the south. From the island’s northern tip, it’s said that you can see the summit of Mt. Bonestell just above the horizon, but I wouldn’t know that and not many other people would either . . . and there’s a reason for this.

The island was discovered by Carlos Montero—the same Carlos Montero who’d eventually become the Coyote Federation president I just mentioned—when he was a young lad striking out on his own to explore the great river with little more than a sea kayak and the clothes on his back. This trip, now the stuff of legend, happened in C.Y. 02, when little was known about Coyote beyond New Florida’s East Channel. After crossing the channel at what’s now known as the Montero Delta, Carlos sailed eastward down the Great Equatorial River, hugging the southern coast of Midland until he reached the continent’s southeast tip. Crossing another channel, he found himself on what appeared to be little more than a dry, sand-covered desert island.

Carlos might have camped on the beach for a day or two and then moved on were it not for the incident that occurred the first night. He’d barely fallen asleep when he heard something moving about his campsite and awoke to find that he wasn’t alone. A couple of small creatures he barely glimpsed had raided his kayak and tried to steal some of his belongings; his flashlight and voice scared them away, but they dropped an object: a tiny flint knife, no larger than the palm of Carlos’s hand.

When Carlos saw this, he realized at once the significance of his discovery. Coyote was not quite as uninhabited as everyone had believed. Over the course of the next few days, as he continued traveling along the island’s southern coast, he tried to study the tiny, monkey-like inhabitants he called sandthieves. However, he learned little more about them other than they were social, tool-using, but otherwise very primitive hominids. They shied away from his attempts to communicate with them and, other than venturing into his camp every night to steal anything that wasn’t tied down, didn’t want anything to do with him. Nonetheless, it could not be denied that they were intelligent.

Carlos recognized just how vulnerable the sandthieves would be if their existence were widely known, so he decided to keep this particular discovery secret. On his hand-drawn map of his travels, he called their homeland Barren Isle in hopes that, with a name like that, it would be ignored and remain unexplored. And when he finally returned to Liberty, he told no one about what he’d found.

It might have worked, but for two things. The tiny aborigines inhabited more places on Coyote than just one island. And when the human colonists were forced to flee Liberty and seek refuge on Midland following the unexpected arrival of Western Hemisphere Union starships from Earth, contact with these other tribes was inevitable.

An oddity of Coyote history is that the first person to communicate with the

sandthieves was a madman: Zoltan Shirow, the leader of the Church of Universal Transformation, a religious cult that had come from Earth among Coyote's first wave of immigrants. A surgically created chimera, Shirow looked like a gargoyle, spoke like a saint, and was totally crazy. He led his followers from New Florida into Midland's Gillis mountain range, where they were thought to have perished on the summit of Mt. Shaw. But Shirow and the woman he'd chosen to be his mate survived, and in time they found a tribe of sandthieves living on the slopes of Mt. Bonestell, a volcano elsewhere on Midland. They determined that Shirow was a god—the very role to which Shirow aspired—and accepted him as their new deity and leader, and over time he learned the fundamentals of their protolanguage.

So it was Zoltan Shirow, of all people, who discovered that the sandthieves called themselves the *chireep*, and that they weren't confined to Barren Isle. Shirow was thought to have been killed when Mt. Bonestell erupted and buried the *chireep* settlement in ash, but not before he told Carlos and his wife Wendy what he'd learned.

This encounter occurred after Shirow abducted their young daughter Susan. In years to come, Susan Montero would grow up to become a naturalist specializing in the study of the *chireep*. And when her father became the president of the Coyote Federation, one of his signature accomplishments was setting aside Barren Isle as a protected refuge for Coyote's indigenous people, for this is what is what the *chireep* truly are.

The Barren Isle National Wilderness Reserve was placed off-limits to human incursion save for occasional scientific expeditions by the Corps of Exploration and the University of New Florida. No one was allowed to visit the place, let alone establish settlements there, without direct permission from Government House, and that was very difficult to come by. No colonists, no tourists, no hunters, no fishermen, no salesmen, and *especially* no missionaries. Even the Sa'Tong followers were firmly told to stay away, which was fine by me. The Sa'Tongians are harmless and I don't have anything against them, but . . . well, one Zoltan Shirow is enough.

People pretty much avoided the island. It was understood that unauthorized visits were punishable by major fines and jail time, and besides, *chireep* were known to be unpredictable and could become hostile at the slightest provocation. And while you might think that a two-foot-tall hominid with soft brown fur and oversized eyes wouldn't pose much of a threat to a full-grown adult human, they traveled as packs and attacked the same way. *Chireep* gangs could swarm even an armed man and tear him limb from limb. Susan Montero's uncle, a no-good lowlife by the name of Lars Thompson, died that way, and while no one really missed him, he stood as an object lesson of what could happen if you rubbed the *chireep* the wrong way

Now we had to rescue someone from there.

And just to make matter worse . . . hell, they were kids.

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"All right, guys," I said, "here's the lowdown. First, I want you to listen to this."

Search and Rescue Team 4—also known as Gomez's Desperados; it had been DeSoto's Desperados until I took over—was seated in the back of a big transport gyro. We'd lifted off from Hurricane Bay just thirty minutes earlier and were now airborne over the Great Equatorial River. A bit of chop that morning; everyone was holding tight as the deck jounced up and down beneath our booted feet. No one was airsick, though; I was the only person who'd had breakfast.

I touched a tab on my pad and it fed a recording into their earpieces. A child's voice: a boy, maybe ten or twelve years old. He was trying to stay calm, but you could hear from the way he stammered that he was scared. Scared, but trying hard not to show it.

"Mayday, mayday . . . I'm . . . we're Anton and Marisa Levitt, and we're . . . we're on Barren Isle, somewhere on a beach on . . . on . . ."

A girl's voice broke in: younger, yet somehow a little steadier. "On the east side, Anton. Tell 'em we're on the east side."

"Okay, sure . . . we're on the west side . . . I mean, the east side . . . of the island, on a beach—" Marisa said something indistinct "—okay, yeah . . . look, we're not staying here 'cause we got people after us, so we're going . . ."

"Inland. Tell 'em we're going up the creek."

"Shh! Stop doing that. We've found a creek, and we've got a boat . . . we stole it to get away from . . . I mean, never mind, okay? . . . just someone, please please please come get us. We're . . . we're in a lot of trouble, and we're running away from . . ."

"Don't tell them!"

A muffled rubbing sound, like someone hastily covering a satphone with his hand. The silence lasted several seconds, then Anton's voice returned.

"I . . . I'm going to leave this on as long as I can, so you can . . . y'know, you can home in on my signal or something. Just please, come get us . . ."

"Soon as you can," Marisa added. "Hurry. Please hurry!"

An abrupt click ended the transmission.

"That was sent on the emergency satphone band." I slipped the pad back into the chest pocket of my fatigue jacket. "Apparently the kid . . . Anton, I mean . . . knew how to access it and how to use it."

"Is the phone still active?" This from Gibby Fae. Gibby had been on quite a few SAR ops with the Desperados. Tough lady, though you wouldn't know it to look at her; when she wasn't wearing her Corps gear, you'd have thought she was a schoolteacher, right down to the wire-rim glasses and greying brown hair tied back in a bun. It wasn't a stereotypical impression; that's what she'd been before she got bored with the classroom and joined the Corps. Her call-sign was Teach, but she preferred her given name.

I shook my head. "Not any more. The comsats locked on the source, and the Corps used it to triangulate their position. Northeast coast of the island, right at the mouth of Ellen Creek. We tracked it down the creek for another ninety-two minutes after the voice transmission, then—" I snapped my fingers "—it went dead, just like that."

"Just like that." Kit Miller had a bad habit of repeating the last thing you said; for that, his nickname was Echo. Young guy, new to the Corps, but dependable.

"Yup. Which could mean anything. The batteries went dead, or the kids dropped the phone in the creek, or—"

"The *chireep* found them," Doc quietly finished.

"Let's hope not." Jack Clark was sitting beside me, literally my right-hand man. He was just a little older than Echo and younger than Doc, Gibby, and me, but he'd proven himself to be an excellent second-in-command. Looked sort of like a younger version of Sawyer Lee and might have been nicknamed Sarge, but most of the time the Desperados simply called him Jack; he was too likable for anything else.

"Say, Lieutenant—" Jack began.

The gyro bounced again, causing everyone to grab the shoulder straps. Our pilot—Lilli Nicholas, who was thankfully *not* nicknamed Crash—called back from the cockpit. "Sorry 'bout the rough ride. I'll get us up a little higher, see if that smoothes things out."

"Yeah, do that, will you?" I turned my head to look out the cabin window behind me. Nothing past the starboard engine nacelle but sun-dappled blue water as far as the eye could see, then the aircraft banked a few degrees to port and Vulcan came into view, the immense cone of Mt. Pesek looming against the midmorning sky. We were coming up on the place where Coyote's globe-circling river widened to become the Meridian Sea. Barren Isle lay on the other side. "Go on, Jack . . . you were saying?"

"This is the second time I've heard this," Clark went on, "and there's still something I don't get. Those kids . . . Anton and Marisa, right? . . . said they stole a boat, and it sounds like they're running away from someone. If that's so, then where did they come from, and who's after them?"

"I think I can answer that," Gibby said, "but you're not going to like it."

Her expression was grim. No, beyond grim: *portentous* is the word. She'd probably menaced a lot of middle-schoolers with that face. I knew her well enough to know that if she had that look, she meant serious business. "Talk to me. What don't I know?" I said.

"Ever heard of the Book and Candle?" she asked, and I shook my head. "That's the name of a religious group . . . I hesitate to call them a cult, but that's pretty much what they are . . . that came together in Shuttlefield a year or so ago."

"A year or so ago . . . yeah, I think I have," Echo said. "Weren't they sort of . . . y'know . . . an answer to the Sa'Tongians?"

"Yes, they are. Just about everything the Sa'Tong is about, they're against." As she said this, Gibby gave Doc an apologetic look. "Sorry, Don," she quietly added, calling him by his first name. "No offense intended."

"None taken." Everyone knew that Doc was a devout follower of Sa'Tong. "Don't worry about my feelings. Just tell us what you know."

"They got started on Earth. Fundamentalist to the nth degree, which is probably a reason why they came here . . . they were too strict even for the Western Hemisphere Union. Just a few came over, but once they settled in Shuttlefield, they began to gain converts, mainly among people who were put off by Sa'Tong."

Again, she glanced at Doc. He simply shrugged. "Sa'Tong isn't for everyone," he admitted. "The Four Codicils can be hard to live by, particularly if you're not willing to accept the idea that man created God and not vice versa, and therefore everyone must be treated as if they're the incarnation of God. Some people don't want to accept the responsibility that comes with this."

That was probably the closest I'd ever heard Doc come to proselytizing. Of course, Sa'Tong was supposed to be more a philosophy than a religion, so there wasn't an emphasis on converting unbelievers; you were supposed find Sa'Tong instead of Sa'Tong reaching out to find you. And since its spiritual leader, an e.t. called the *Chaa'z'braan*, looked like a giant, half-blind frog walking upright, that sometimes made hiser teachings and those of the *Sa'Tong-tas* a bit hard to swallow if you were stuck on Earth religion (except maybe Buddhism, which Sa'Tong resembled to a certain degree).

"Anyway," Gibby continued, "the Book and Candle gained members while they were in. Shuttlefield, but they also got a lot of unwanted attention, mainly because of their beliefs . . . women are always to be subservient to men, children have no inherent rights, corporal punishment is acceptable as a form of family discipline, so forth and so on."

"So forth and so on," Echo said, "and let me guess . . . they got run out of town."

"Pretty much, yes. Not only that, but because just about everything they believe runs contrary to the Federation's Bill of Rights, there was nowhere else they could go and still be able to practice their religion and not run up against the law . . . especially the ones regarding child abuse." Gibby frowned. "I had a Book and Candle kid in my class when I was still a teacher. He came in every day with bruises his father had given him."

"And there was nothing you could do about it?" I asked.

"Ask me why I gave up teaching and joined the Corps," she replied. I decided that explained enough and didn't. "Anyway . . . they made the decision to pack up and leave the colonies completely to start their own settlement. The last I heard of the

Book and Candle, they'd purchased a couple of sailboats in Bridgeton, learned how to use them, and sailed east to Fort Lopez."

"Ft. Lopez? On Hammerhead?" Echo whistled. "Okay, now I *know* they're nuts."

I couldn't help but agree. During the WHU occupation, Fort Lopez had been the site of the main Union Guard military base on Coyote, a seemingly impregnable fortress located atop an escarpment overlooking the junction of the Midland Channel and Short River. It was destroyed on Liberation Day by an act of desperation: the *Alabama*, the first starship to reach Coyote, was deorbited and brought down on the base, with the resultant nuclear explosion obliterating it and everyone there. In the twelve Coyote years since then, no one had resettled Fort Lopez or even tried to salvage what was left of it. The site was radioactive, making it too dangerous to be inhabited.

"Surely they didn't—?" I began.

"No, sir, I don't think so," Clark said. While we'd been speaking, he'd had his pad open in his lap, searching for something. I looked down and now saw that he'd pulled up a real-time satellite image of Hammerhead's western shore. "There's Fort Lopez," he said, pointing to a scorched area atop the rocky bluffs, "but down here, about twenty clicks south—"

"Yeah, I see." I reached over him to tap the screen and zoom in. Sure enough, on a lowland coastal area south of the destroyed base were signs of a small village: a cluster of buildings and houses, plowed fields, what appeared to be a boat dock. "At least they weren't stupid enough to build on top of the old base. They'd all be dying of radiation sickness by now."

"Uh-huh." Doc nodded. "We can just hope they didn't go up there to scrounge for building material. Or if they did, they took a Geiger counter with them." It wasn't hard to tell that he didn't think these particular settlers would have that much common sense.

"So it sounds like the kids came from there," Gibby said. "They stole a boat and probably the satphone, too, and made their way across the channel to the nearest place . . . Barren Isle. Now they're calling for help because they're afraid the people they left behind are going to come after them."

"Yeah, someone might come after them," Echo said quietly. "But that's not the only thing they should be afraid of."

No one had to ask what he meant by that.

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We reached Barren Isle a couple of hours later.

As the island's southeast corner came into view, Lilli brought the gyro down to the deck. Flying so low above Short River that we could see propwash from the rotors kicking up ripples, the gyro cruised up the channel. Our pilot hugged the shoreline all the way; the low altitude made Echo nervous, and I explained that the reason Lilli was doing this was to minimize the chances a *chireep* tribe might spot the gyro and follow us on foot to our destination. I don't think it helped his nerves, but I couldn't blame him. Lilli was an excellent gyro pilot, but she could be scary. We'd just come within sight of the narrow inlet that marked the mouth of Ellen Creek when she called back to us.

"We're not alone," Lilli said. "Got company below."

We all leaned forward to peer through the cockpit windows. Lilli obliged us by taking the gyro up a couple of hundred feet and circling the inlet. Just as she said, we weren't the only people there. A large sailboat was floating in the shallows just offshore; a pair of tents had been set up on the grassy terrain beyond the sand where a couple of canoes had been beached. Tiny figures standing about on shore shaded their eyes with their hands as they peered up at the gyro. No one waved to us. They just watched the gyro as it orbited them.

"I bet they're from—" I looked over at Gibby "—what did you say the name of the Book and Candle settlement was?"

"I didn't, but I think they're calling it New Salem."

"New Salem?" Echo asked. "Oh, that's swell. Do they hang witches there, too?"

"I wouldn't put it past them."

"Hey, c'mon," I said, "let's try not to judge these people. They might have some strange views, but it's not for us to—" I caught another scolding look from Gibby and gave up. "Look, we've got a job to do, so let's just do it." I turned to Lilli. "Put us down near the camp, please."

She landed the gyro just far enough away to keep the rotors from ripping the tents loose or blowing sand in the settlers' faces. Everyone unbuckled their seat belts, but I waited until the engines wound down and the dust settled before I popped the rear hatch and lowered the ramp. At my insistence, the team left their flechette rifles and sidearms in the aircraft. The Corps wasn't the Militia, after all, and I didn't want us to come across as the heavies. Religious sects had a fear of persecution, although sometimes I wondered if some of them secretly relished it. Nothing like a little martyrdom to make you feel special.

The settlers from New Salem didn't come out to greet us. A half-dozen or so men and a couple of women hovered quietly near the tents, regarding us with unwelcoming eyes. Both women wore ankle-length dresses with long sleeves and high collars; there was a warm summer breeze off the waters, and it blew gently against the homespun shawls wrapped tightly around their heads. The men were under no such restrictions; cargo shorts and T-shirts for most of them, with a couple of guys peeled down to the waist and wearing nothing more than sandals and cut-offs. Working on their manly tans while the women sweltered for the sake of god-fearing modesty. Nice.

Oh, and they were armed, too. Rifles, handguns, even a crossbow carried by one angry-looking fellow. We'd left our weapons out of sight, but obviously they didn't feel the need to exercise the same restraint. When I saw this, I felt a flash of regret for telling the Desperados to leave their guns in the gyro. I told myself that Lee would've given the same order. We were an SAR team, not soldiers or cops. Still, I quietly told the others to stick close to the gyro before I started walking over to the camp.

One of the settlers did the same; we met halfway between. He was a burly chap in his middle years, with longish blond hair turning grey and a day's growth of whiskers on a fleshy and not unpleasant face. He didn't seem like a bad fellow until you looked at his eyes. They were blue as ice and hard and mean.

"Good morning," I said when we were close enough for me to offer a handshake. "I'm Lt. Eddie Gomez, Corps of Exploration Search and Rescue Team Four."

He didn't immediately respond in any way. Just stood there and looked me over with a wry half-smile that hinted at condescending amusement, like I was a not very funny joke he'd just heard. When he finally deigned to shake my hand, his grip was weightless and reluctant. He didn't want to touch me, but felt like he had to.

"Fletcher," he said, and didn't let me know if this was his first or last name. "My people and I are here to search for a couple of youths from our settlement. And you?"

"Here for the same reason. We received an emergency transmission—"

"From a satphone?" Fletcher asked and I nodded. "That would be the one the boy stole. A valuable piece of equipment that belongs to us."

"I'll make sure we recover it when we find the kids."

"No." He shook his head. "We don't wish for you to search for them. My people and I are capable of finding the children on our own. Thank you for being willing to assist us, Lieutenant, but your help is unnecessary." *And unwanted*, he silently added; he didn't say this aloud, but the meaning couldn't have been clearer.

“Well, sir,” I said, “I’m afraid I have to disagree. For one thing, because they used the satphone to call for help, we have a fix on their location.” I pointed to the narrow river winding through the nearby salt marshes. “They’re down Ellen Creek, about fifteen kilometers or so. In our gyro, we can be there in just a few minutes.”

I didn’t tell him that the Corps had lost the transponder signal shortly after the transmission was received, and so the kids’ whereabouts weren’t as well established as I’d led him to believe. “And second,” I went on, “Barren Isle is a national wildlife preserve, with strict laws prohibiting it from being explored without prior written permission of the Interior Ministry.”

Fletcher was unmoved. “We don’t recognize your authority,” he said, placing his hands on his hips and tilting his head back slightly. “New Salem doesn’t belong to the Coyote Federation. We are not beholden to any laws but those of God and our own . . . in this instance, the authority that parents have over their children.”

“Uh-huh. And their parents . . . are they here?” I looked past him at the small group silently observing us. “May I speak with them, please?”

Fletcher hesitated. “They are not. They’ve remained in New Salem.”

“Why? Aren’t they concerned about their kids?”

“Jon and Esther failed in their responsibilities as parents. They didn’t control Anton and Marisa, and as a consequence their children have run off. The community has no choice but to retrieve their offspring, after which they will be disciplined and their parents will be given the proper spiritual guidance.”

Oh, boy. That didn’t sound good for either the kids or their folks. There was also something peculiar about Fletcher’s explanation. If these people were trying to bring back a couple of runaways, wouldn’t they want their parents to be involved, even if the “community” was angry with the whole family?

But it wasn’t my job to provide counseling. I was there to locate a couple of children who’d had the bad judgment—or desperation—to flee to one of Coyote’s most dangerous places. So I kept a poker face and tried to hide my disgust. “Be that as it may, Mr. Fletcher, I’m going to have to ask that you and your companions go no further than where you are now. Anton and Marisa have put their lives at risk by coming here, and frankly, so have you. The *chireep* are unpredictable and they don’t like visitors, which is why this island—”

“We’ve already sent people up the river to find the children.”

“What?”

A slight smile, almost smug. “How do you think we knew where they’re going? We heard the same transmission. So once we followed them here, two of our people took a canoe and went down the river after them.” He pointed to Ellen Creek. “Walter and Hans have been gone for a couple of hours now. I expect we’ll see them return before the day’s end, with Anton and Marisa in tow.”

The way he said “in tow” made it sound like the kids would be dragged back with ropes around their necks. I wouldn’t put it past these bastards. There was also something else about what he’d just said that didn’t sound quite right, but I didn’t stop to think about it. He’d pissed me off, and it was time to let him know it.

No longer trying to hold my temper, I stepped closer to Fletcher, close enough for him to take a good, hard look at my eyes. “All right, now you listen to me,” I said, softly but with steel in my voice. “I don’t give a damn about your beliefs. I don’t even care why those kids decided to run away, although I’ve got a pretty good idea. All I care about is getting everyone back safe and sound. The *chireep*—”

“Sandthieves don’t frighten us. My men are armed.”

I was tempted to tell him that it wouldn’t matter. The *chireep* weren’t scared of guns, and they’d been known to attack and overwhelm even armed men. But I didn’t want Walter and Hans opening fire on the first *chireep* they saw. Or *might see*; I was

still hoping that we'd somehow manage to slip in and out of Barren Isle without being spotted by the inhabitants.

"Call them back, Fletcher."

"They don't have a radio. They don't need one. I'm sure they can take care of themselves."

There was a brief, smug smile as he said this. The arrogance of a stupid man. I did my best to swallow my anger. "Please, Mr. Fletcher, let us handle this. You'll only make things worse."

He said nothing, simply shook his head. Behind him, the other members of the Book and Candle stoically gazed at me as if I was . . . well, who knows? Maybe I was just an apostate, but it's possible that they'd determined I was in league with Satan. The Corps of Exploration: tools of the devil.

There was no point in further discussion, so I turned and walked back to the gyro. My team had witnessed the conversation, and although they hadn't heard every word, they'd gotten the gist of it.

"We're going after the kids?" Clark asked.

An unnecessary question. Lilli was already in the cockpit and starting the engines. The rotors chugged a couple of times, then the blades began to purr and turn. I turned to the others and clapped my hands. "Okay, Desperados, we're moving out. If we're lucky, we'll find the kids before these morons do."

"Or the *chireep*," Gibby added quietly.

\* \* \*

Once the gyro took off from the beach, Lilli ascended to about one thousand feet and began following Ellen Creek as it wound its way southwest into the island.

Ellen Creek was actually a wide, shallow river, just deep enough to allow passage of small craft like canoes, kayaks, or keelboats. Its serpentine shape and eroded riverbanks attested that it was an old river, cut by water and time through the heart of the island itself. No one remembered why it was named Ellen Creek, or even who Ellen was; place-names given by the early colonists tended to be arbitrary, christened on the spur of the moment to honor someone or something forgotten only a few years later.

Lilli kept the gyro well below cruise speed, giving us time to be on the lookout for anything on the creek that didn't belong. So far as anyone knew, the *chireep* had never learned to build boats; it was arguable whether they even knew how to swim, given the fact that no one had ever seen them do so. So if we spotted a canoe, it either belonged to Anton and Marisa or to the adults pursuing them. Since all we had were the coordinates of the last satphone transmission, it seemed likely that our best means of finding the kids was to use our eyes.

Barren Isle swept beneath us as a vast desert, its dry terrain broken only by spiderbushes along the creek, the occasional ball plant, and small, stunted-looking parasol trees, their broad fronds open to catch the midday sun. Off in the distance, a pair of swoops circled a stone arch forming a bridge between two mesas, probably hunting a small animal cowering in the shadows. Bear loomed over the western horizon as an immense, banded hemisphere, its ring plane rising high into the cloudless sky. Looking down upon all this, I reflected on the fact that, although humans had been on this world for less than sixty years, in that time we'd nonetheless made our presence felt. Places like this, trackless and undisturbed, were becoming scarce, visited only by accident. . . .

But was this really an accident?

"Colonial for your thoughts?"

I looked up to find Gibby quietly studying me from across the aisle. I'd been quiet ever since we lifted off from the beach. She'd figured that I was thinking about something and wanted to know what it was.

“Something Fletcher said back there . . . it doesn’t add up.” I looked again out the window beside me, and suddenly I realized what it was. “He said they knew where the kids had gone because they overheard their satphone transmission. But you can’t—”

“But you can’t do that,” Echo said, and for once his propensity for repeating the last thing you said wasn’t annoying. “Satphone signals are ground-to-space, sent straight to orbit. They’re not like regular radio transmissions that someone else can pick up.”

“Exactly.” I nodded. “So he was lying, and that’s not how they knew where Anton and Marisa were heading when they ran away from their . . .”

My voice trailed off. Another thought occurred to me. Fletcher had told me that their parents—Jon and Esther, was it?—were in trouble, too, because they’d failed to “control” their children. But what if they *hadn’t* failed? What if—?

“Something on the creek, Eddie,” Lilli called back. “Straight ahead, twelve o’clock.”

Pushing aside my thoughts, I unfastened my seat belt and, bracing myself against the cabin bulkheads, lurched forward to the cockpit. “What do you see?” I asked as I bent down to peer over the pilot’s shoulder.

“Down there . . . see?” Not taking her hands from the yoke, Lilli tipped her chin in the direction she wanted me to look.

Her eyes were better than mine; I didn’t see what she meant at first. Then I did: two canoes, both beached at a bend on the south side of the creek. One of them, the smaller of the two, was half in the water and upside-down. The other had been pulled up on the bank, its paddles neatly stowed within the bow and stern seats.

“Does that match the satphone coordinates?” I asked.

“Right on the money.” By then, Lilli had brought the gyro down to three hundred feet; she orbited the site, giving us a chance to look the place over. “Guess that explains what happened to the signal . . . they capsized.”

It appeared that she was right, and on the next pass, I saw the reason why. There was an elongated shadow beneath the overturned canoe, just below the waterline and at an angle. A sandbar. It became clear what had happened. The kids must have run aground, and in their efforts to rock themselves free had instead caused the canoe to overturn. It was a good bet that the satphone lay on the creek bed somewhere below.

The accident must have given Walter and Hans a chance to catch up with Anton and Marisa. Obviously it was their canoe beached nearby. However, there was no one in sight. So far as we could tell, the boats had been deserted. The adults were still after the Levitt children, but apparently they hadn’t caught them yet. Maybe the kids had seen them coming and high-tailed it.

“Okay, put us down over there.” I pointed to a patch of level ground about ten meters from the river. Lilli nodded, and as she circled in for a touchdown, I made my way back to the cabin. “The kids are on foot, probably heading south,” I told the others. “The Book and Candle guys are somewhere behind them. We’re going to double-time it and catch up with everyone.”

“Why don’t we use the gyro?” Clark asked. “We can get to ’em faster if we—”

“We’re deep in *chireep* country. They’ve probably spotted us by now. I don’t want to take the chance that a hunting party might follow the gyro to the kids.” I glanced at Gibby, who knew more about sandthieves than anyone else in the Desperados; she nodded in agreement. “Echo, you’re staying with the gyro. Doc, Gibby, Jack, you’re with me.”

The wheels thumped against the ground; sand swirled around the windows. This time, I didn’t wait for the props to wind down before opening the hatch. We were in a race now, and the other guys had a head start.

It was easy enough to determine which direction everyone had gone. Small footprints in the muddy riverbank near the capsized canoe, along with a heap of waterlogged knapsacks, bedrolls, and a tent pack, showed that the kids had managed to salvage at least some of their belongings. The satphone was nowhere to be found, though; my guess about its location was probably correct. Larger footprints led from the beached canoe to the belongings; both sets led away from Ellen Creek into the drylands.

The four of us—Doc, Gibby, Jack, and yours truly—set out to follow the tracks. Jack and I carried our flechette rifles at ready, while Gibby helped Doc with the med kits. At least we wouldn't have to worry about boids. If those big, flightless raptors had ever lived on Barren Isle, they'd long since been hunted to extinction by the *chireep* . . . or at least that was the most popular explanation for their absence. But while it made common sense to be cautious, Gibby warned us against going in with guns blazing.

"If the *chireep* are around," she said as we left the riverside, "they'll pick up on any hostile intentions we may have. Best thing to do is keep the guns down as much as we can."

"I thought the sandthieves didn't know about firearms." Jack walked alongside her, flechette rifle cradled in his arms, barrel pointed at the ground but ready to be raised in an instant. The sergeant nervously eyed the small, brush-covered hillocks around us—hoodoos, they were called, an old Earth term—as if expecting a *chireep* tribe to be hiding behind any one of them.

"Oh, they do, all right," Gibby replied. "We've been here long enough now for the *chireep* to learn. They're just not scared of them, that's all."

Only a kilometer or so later, we learned the truth of this.

The trail led us between a couple of steep, tall hoodoos, and there they were: two corpses lying in the sand. For a second, I thought they were heaps of trash someone had thoughtlessly dumped in the desert. Then I stopped and looked closer. No, these torn, bloodstained rags and stinking pieces of meat were what remained of two human bodies. Two men who'd been dismembered alive, not dying until they'd had been ripped apart, their limbs and organs torn from them and scattered like so much offal.

Jack got sick. Gibby covered her face and turned away. Even Doc looked ill; he might be inured to blood and guts, but no one could ever get used to violence like this. I took a minute to walk back a few steps, breathe deep, and remind myself that I was team leader and therefore needed to keep it together. Then I turned back around and tapped Doc on the shoulder, and together we approached the remains.

"It's not the kids," Doc said softly. "Thank God for that." He made the sign of the Sa'tong, touching his forehead and then his heart.

I nodded, feeling nauseous and yet relieved at the same time, and hating myself for the latter. Whatever sort of men Walter and Hans had been, no one deserved to die like this. Tearing my gaze away from the carnage, I noticed a flechette rifle on the ground nearby. It was hard to tell whether it had been fired, because flechettes don't leave shell casing, but it didn't appear so. There were no *chireep* bodies.

I pointed this out to Doc. "If they were armed, why didn't they defend themselves?"

"Maybe they did," Doc said, "and the *chireep* took away their dead."

"Or maybe they never had a chance." By then, Jack had recovered. Tight-lipped and subdued, he reluctantly walked over to join us; Gibby stayed where she was, her back turned. Jack pointed to the hoodoos around us. "Look at this place. Good spot for an ambush."

"An *ambush*?" Doc raised a skeptical eyebrow. "C'mon, Sarge—"

"He's right. It was an ambush." Gibby was still keeping her distance, but she could

hear everything we said. “They’re intelligent beings, Doc. If they can organize hunting parties and live together in tribal settlements, then they’re fully capable of hiding in wait for an enemy to come up on them, then taking them by surprise.”

She glanced over her shoulder at the remains of the two men, then turned her eyes away again. “These poor bastards never had a chance,” she added, her voice almost inaudible. “They probably didn’t even get off a shot before—”

She stopped herself, her head jerking up. She was quiet a moment, then said, “Hear that?”

No one spoke. We held our breaths and, looking about, listened. For a few moments, nothing. Then our ears caught what Gibby had heard:

Somewhere nearby, a child was crying.

\* \* \*

“That way.” Jack pointed away from the bodies, toward the south. “Past those hoodoos.”

I looked in that direction. There was a small cluster of hoodoos about twenty-five meters away. Short, rounded, and off-white, they bore an uncomfortable resemblance to a row of teeth. I shaded my eyes with my hands and tried to find the source of the sound, but the sergeant was right. It’d had come from the other side of the formations.

I heard it again: a little louder now, definitely the sound of a young girl weeping. In pain or in terror, I didn’t know, but every instinct made me want to run over and find out. Gibby almost did, before I grabbed her by the arm and stopped her.

“No!” I snapped. “Stand down . . . all of you,” I added, because Doc was about to do the same thing. “Don’t move!”

“What are you . . . oh.” Gibby had strong maternal instincts, but she wasn’t reckless; the same thought occurred to her as well. The *chireep* had successfully ambushed a couple of humans; who was to say that they wouldn’t try again with a larger group? “All right, I understand. Now what?”

I looked at Doc and Jack. They’d frozen as well, and it wasn’t hard to tell that they were frightened. All of our lives, including those of the children, depended on what we—what *I* did—in the next few seconds.

An eerie silence had fallen upon the place. Dead quiet; even the girl had stopped crying for a moment. And in that stillness, something occurred to me. If there were *chireep* around—and I had no reason to believe that there weren’t—then why hadn’t they attacked us? They didn’t give a damn about our guns, and four humans can’t be much more formidable than two. Then why . . . ?

“No!” I heard the girl again. This time, she cried out: “No! Get away!”

“Damn it, Eddie,” Gibby hissed, “do something!”

I hate to admit it, but for a moment, I’d frozen up. The girl’s scream, and Gibby’s insistence, broke the ice. “Hey!” I called out, cupping my mouth with my hands. “Hey, is that Marisa . . . Marisa Levitt?”

For a moment or two, we heard nothing, then . . . “Is someone there? Is that someone?”

This was followed by a boy’s voice: “Over here! We’re over here!”

Every impulse told me to run straight for the hoodoos. I might have done it, too, if Jack hadn’t touched my arm. “Chief . . . don’t move,” he murmured. “Look to your left, nine o’clock.”

Without moving my head, I shifted my eyes in that direction. On top of the hoodoo beside us crouched a pair of *chireep*.

No larger than a couple of small children, yet far more menacing than their size implied, they studied us with large, unblinking eyes. Their short, coarse fur was dark brown, streaked and matted with sand, but they weren’t completely naked, wearing loincloths crudely woven from sourgrass. Both carried long spears, their

heads fashioned from flint, sharp and lethal-looking.

In recent years, popular culture has sought to tame the *chireep*. I've seen children's books and fantasy anime depicting sandthieves as cute, cuddlesome little elves dancing around campfires, riding boids, and playing practical jokes on big, dumb humans. But there was nothing whimsical about the creatures watching us. They were as dangerous as a wolf pack; I would've rather faced a street gang just then.

"Eddie," Gibby whispered, "to the right—"

I didn't have to look, but I did anyway. Three more *chireep* had materialized atop the hoodoo to the other side of us. Jack had been right to be suspicious; the tribe had probably been hiding behind them all along, silently stalking us. Even before another half-dozen or so emerged from behind the hoodoos in front of us, I knew that we were surrounded.

"Okay, Eddie," Doc whispered. "Your call . . . now what?"

I had a flechette rifle in my hands, but I realized at once that trying to use it would be the last mistake I'd ever make. The two dead men at my feet were silent witnesses to that fact. So I kept my weapon lowered. "Jack," I said quietly without looking at him, "whatever you do, don't raise your gun."

"Copy that." His voice was trembling, but calm.

Trying to steady my nerves, I took a couple of deep breaths. My heart was hammering against my chest. How did it turn so cold all of a sudden? No time to wonder about that.

"Marisa!" I called out again. "Are you and Anton okay? Are you hurt?"

A short pause. "No . . . no, we're okay," she shouted back. "We're—"

"Get us outta here!" Anton yelled, interrupting her.

It was clear that the boy was more frightened than his sister. Wasn't he supposed to be the older child? I guessed they were right about girls growing up faster than boys. But the *chireep* were nervous, too, and if we were going to save him and his sister, I had to keep the kid from panicking and doing something that would get us all killed.

"Mr. Levitt," I called back, doing my best to keep my voice steady and even, "I'm Lt. Gomez, Corps of Exploration Search and Rescue Team Four. We're here to get you and Miss Levitt, but I need for you to help us. Do you think you can do that?"

"Good," Gibby whispered. "Talk to him like he's a grown-up."

"Yeah . . . yeah, I think so." Anton's voice was a little steadier.

"They killed Mr. Swenson and Mr. McClary," Marisa blurted out. "They were following us and the . . . the sandthieves caught us and then they came down on them and . . . and then . . ."

"I understand, Miss Levitt," I replied, but nonetheless, she'd just told me something important: the *chireep* had used the kids to lure the adults into a trap. Then I recalled another bit of Coyote history: when Susan Montero was abducted by Zoltan Shirow's *chireep* many years ago, the child hadn't been harmed then either. The tribe had let her go unharmed, but only because her parents hadn't come charging to the rescue.

If we could just be patient, not lose our heads . . .

The *chireep* were watching us, but not quietly. I could hear them softly chittering and cooing to one another: *cococha choo shee sha* and so forth, the protolanguage that xenologists and linguists at the University of New Florida had been spending years trying to understand. I couldn't tell what they were saying either, but I had a hunch they were waiting to see what we'd do next . . . and expecting the same thing Walter and Hans had done.

Now I understood. Or at least thought I did. Only one way to find out . . .

"Mr. Levitt, Miss Levitt," I called back, "I need you to listen to me, okay? Listen to

me and do exactly what I say. You think you can do that?"

"All right," Anton replied, "okay."

"Sure, okay," Marisa added.

"Good. Here goes." I took another deep breath. "I want you to walk out around the hoodoos . . . the little hills, I mean . . . and come toward us. Don't run . . . *walk!* Just be very calm and steady, and come to us, because we can't come to you. Understand?"

"They're all around us! They'll hurt us!"

"No, they won't. They'll leave you alone. They just want us all to go." I hoped I wasn't wrong. Beside me, Doc was whispering what I guessed was a Sa'Tongian prayer.

A long pause. "Okay," Anton said at last. "We'll try."

"One more thing. When you see us, don't run . . . *and don't look down!*"

The next several seconds were the longest in my life. Did I say seconds? I don't think I even breathed, so it must have been less than a minute . . . but it seemed much longer. Then two small, blond-haired figures carefully stepped out from between the hoodoos. As soon as they spotted us, I could tell that Marisa wanted to break and run, but Anton grabbed his sister by the hand and restrained her. Good boy.

The *chireep* who'd been guarding them appeared on the hillocks, spears and knives in hand. Muttering to one another, they watched Anton and Marisa as they slowly walked toward us. The *chireep* on the hoodoos beside us, though, had fallen silent. From the corner of my eye, I could see them hefting their spears and knives, tensed and ready to attack.

"Steady," I whispered to the others. "Don't move."

The children crossed the distance without incident. They were doing fine until they got within sight of the bodies. Marisa gasped and Anton visibly flinched; both stopped in their tracks. They'd probably seen what happened, but not up close. "Don't look at 'em," I said, no longer needing to raise my voice. "Just step around them and keep coming. Easy does it. Easy . . ."

They made it through the killing field, but Marisa did it with her eyes closed and Anton leading her by the hand. Their faces were filthy, their clothes caked with dried mud and sand, but neither seemed to be hurt. I was the team leader, but so far as the kids were concerned, Gibby was the one they wanted. I guess the former school-teacher in her gave off a certain vibe I'd never have. She went down on one knee and gathered them in her arms, and I gave everyone a few seconds to have a good cry.

But not long. The *chireep* had fallen silent. There were a couple of dozen around us by then, standing atop the hoodoos and at the far end of the field. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that the way we'd come was clear.

So was the unspoken message: *Go . . . before we change our minds.*

"All right, guys," I said quietly, "let's get out of here."

\* \* \*

We remained quiet as we followed our footprints back to the creek. The *chireep* shadowed us for a little while; they kept their distance while remaining within spear range, and we were conscious that they were at our backs. The children were exhausted, but while Marisa let Jack carry her on his back, Anton insisted on walking. He was doing his best to put on a brave front, and so I continued to address him as "Mr. Levitt" and "sir." He'd grown up a little bit today; he deserved it.

Somewhere along the way, the *chireep* vanished. One minute, they were behind us. The next, they were gone. By then, we were within sight of the gyro. They'd assured themselves, I suppose, that we were leaving and taking the kids with us. For them, that was probably all that mattered. They didn't want to kill us. They just wanted us to leave them the hell alone.

We loaded the Levitt kids aboard the gyro, and Lilli wasted no time getting us airborne. As soon as we lifted off, Anton and Marisa broke down. They'd been terrified for hours, believing that any minute they'd be slaughtered like the two men who'd chased them into the outback. Now that they were safe, they let go of their emotions. Gibby, Jack, and I did our best to comfort them while Echo helped Doc check them for injuries and treat the minor bruises and abrasions they'd received, and between tears and mouthfuls of trail mix—the kids were ravenous—we got the story.

Anton and Marisa had run away from New Salem, yes, but not from their parents. Jon and Esther Levitt had actually helped their kids escape. Some time back, the Levitts had come to the realization that they'd made a serious mistake by joining the Book and Candle; it wasn't the spiritual fellowship they'd been led to believe it was, but rather an authoritarian cult, with Fletcher . . . or Pastor Fletcher, as he was known . . . in control of all aspects of their daily lives. The kids didn't come right out and say it, but it wasn't hard to figure out that Fletcher wasn't above sexually abusing his flock; any woman in New Salem could be called forth to be his "companion," and Fletcher defined womanhood as beginning at adolescence. When his attention turned toward Marisa, Jon and Esther quietly decided that their children needed to get out of there, even if they themselves couldn't leave. The Book and Candle literally shackled members who broke any of Pastor Fletcher's many rules, and Jon's ankles had been bound with leather and chain for putting himself between the cult leader and his daughter.

The Levitts waited until the next overcast night—the light cast by our neighbor 47 Uma-B can be awfully bright; you have to get a thick cloud cover before you have a truly dark night—then sent the children down to the dock. Over the past few days, they'd secretly gathered various items Anton and Marisa would need, including a satphone Esther stole from Fletcher's cabin. Jon and Esther instructed the children to steal a canoe and paddle west across the channel to Barren Isle. The Levitts had learned enough about the island to know where the inlet to Ellen Creek lay; if the kids could make it to the creek, they could paddle inland and elude anyone pursuing them long enough for someone to come to the rescue.

It was a good plan. It might have worked were it not for two things. Somehow, once Fletcher discovered Anton and Marisa were missing and a canoe was gone, he must have found a way to get the truth out of their parents. I didn't want to contemplate what methods he'd used; they were probably ugly. And second, as we'd already seen, their canoe had run around on a sandbar and tipped over, causing the loss of the satphone. The children were still salvaging their belongings from the water when they saw the other canoe coming down the creek. They'd fled on foot, but not before they were spotted.

That's when they were found by the *chireep*. But the sandthieves didn't harm them. Instead, they'd herded the kids behind the hoodoos, and then turned on the men pursuing them.

"Are you saying—?" I stopped, not quite believing what Anton had just told me.

"Are you saying that the sandthieves protected you?" Gibby finished.

The two kids looked at each other as if this had just occurred to them, too. Then Anton nodded solemnly, and so did Marisa.

Gibby and I shared a look of our own. This was the part of the story no one would ever believe. And in fact, when I later wrote the mission report, I left that bit out, simply stating instead that the Desperados located the Levitt children and rescued them before any harm could come to them.

For the rest of my life, though, I knew that we hadn't saved the kids from the *chireep*, but from their own kind.

We didn't take Anton and Marisa back to the beach. We flew low over the camp,

letting Pastor Fletcher and his followers figure out for themselves that we'd found the missing kids and were leaving. I didn't ask Lilli to land, though, because that would've given Fletcher a chance to reclaim the children, and this was the last thing any of us wanted.

We maintained radio silence as we commenced our return trip to Hurricane Bay, but we didn't stay quiet. Once Sawyer Lee received my report, he forwarded it to Government House, and in time an investigation led to the Militia swooping down on New Salem. Jon and Esther Levitt weren't the only couple being held against their will by the Book and Candle; there were other disenchanting church members whom Pastor Fletcher had put in shackles, and the Militia freed them all. Less than a month after we rescued Anton and Marisa, they were reunited with their parents. They're all living in Liberty now; the kids are growing up fine, and I see them from time to time.

Fletcher might have had something to say about this, if he'd had the chance.

I was so angry at him and his followers that, when we flew over their camp on the way out, I decided not to raise him on the wireless. I just didn't want to talk to the sick bastard. So even if he deduced that we'd located and rescued the Levitt kids, he didn't learn from us what had happened to Hans and Walter, the two men he'd sent out after them.

I just neglected to tell him, that's all.

So Fletcher went to find them himself. He and another man took their other canoe down Ellen Creek. And they were never seen again.