

CHAPTER 3



Enough of this, let's go back," grouched the young artilleryman, trudging southwest along a well-used trail through the forest ahead of Private Felix Meder of the Mounted Rifles.

"A little farther," Felix said. "I can't make sense of the tracks on this path—it's too dry—but it's almost as big and straight as a road. It has to go somewhere."

Felix didn't know the artilleryman with the strong British accent—identified only as "Private Hudgens" when they were arbitrarily paired—but though he seemed a little jaded, he wasn't a malingerer. They'd already explored quite a distance from the wreck, and he was understandably reluctant to continue. Now he glanced back and sighed dejectedly, slinging the musket he'd been carrying at the ready. "Fancy yourself a yankee frontiersman, do you? Tracking your wily prey through the dark forest with that bloody rifle? There may be Mexicans in these woods, but you'll find no savage red men." He patted the musket. "Mexicans are civilized folk and fight like Froggies. I'd sooner have this. Get off three shots to your one."

Felix sighed in turn. Perhaps he was a "yankee," though his parents had immigrated to Ohio from Munich a year before he was born. And he *had* grown up in the woods with a squirrel rifle, steeped in tales of the frontiersmen who opened the country around the family farm a couple of genera-

tions before. He revealed none of this and didn't point out that he was at least three times as likely to *hit* his target with the rifle as the other man was with a musket, and at three times the distance as well. Not that distance meant much in these woods. "Your own lieutenant sent us to find water," Felix pointed out.

"Aye" —Hudgens snorted—"an' have a look about. I only hope Captain Cayce has woke up an' taken charge. Word is, he's a man of experience. Olayne's even sillier than most young officers, born without the brains of a goose." He chuckled. "An' he was flustered as a new-hatched goose when he chose a half dozen pairs o' fellows to have a scout." He glared back at Felix. "But he only picked *us* because we had dry powder, all our kit, an' *you* looked so bloody bored. *Bored*, damn you, after what happened, an' I had the bad luck to be by you!"

"I wasn't bored," Felix almost whispered. He'd actually been in a kind of shock and had gathered his gear and made himself and his weapon ready without a conscious thought. Personally, he was glad Olayne had given him something to do.

"Well," Hudgens stated, stopping and turning around, "even the lieutenant never meant us to trek for miles, for the rest o' the day. There's not a drop o' water this way, nor even a dried-up stream. Aside from these damned trees, this is the flattest ground I ever trod. *I'm* bored now, an' tired an' hungry too. You seem a good lad, for a horse rifleman, an' we've had our stroll. Time to go back."

Felix considered. He wasn't in charge, of course, and suspected the other man had at least five years on his own nineteen. But since neither wanted to be alone, turning back required his consent. That kind of put him in charge, in a way. "Just a bit farther, like I said." He tilted his head to the sky. "We haven't seen any animals, not even a squirrel, but have you noticed all the strange birds overhead?"

Hudgens scowled. "Aye," he admitted. "Me old man was a fiend for birds an' such. Dragged me through the salt marshes near every day when I was a nipper, like he was tryin' to drown me. But I reckon it made me take notice o' birds, an' I never seen any like these. Some are straightforward, despite differences you'd expect in a strange land, but most look more like *lizards* to me. Or some kind o' damn bloody bat."

"Some could be bats," Felix conceded. "I've only ever seen one, trapped in the loft of a barn. It didn't look like these. It could've been a different

kind. But whatever *any* of them are, they all seem to be flitting *that way*." He pointed the muzzle of his rifle down the trail.

"We're just pushin' 'em."

Felix shook his head. "No, they're flying that way from behind us too, ignoring us. Something's drawing them. Maybe it's water."

Hudgens tilted his wheel hat back and grimaced, rubbing his forehead. Then lifted his canteen as if evaluating the weight. If the water butts in the ship were broken, and it was likely they were, things would get very thirsty. He might consider Olayne a fool, but seemed to agree with his instinct to find water. "Could be, I reckon. Very well. Just a few hundred more paces. Agreed?"

Felix paused, then nodded. "Agreed."

They didn't go much farther at all before both of them noticed more sky leaking down through the trees ahead. Hudgens started to quicken his pace, but Felix held him back.

"What?"

"This is wrong," Felix cautioned.

"What do you mean?"

"Listen."

The raucous sound of the birds in the woods had increased tremendously all around, but the noise was even louder ahead. If they'd come to a water hole or stream, the flying creatures acted just as excited to find it. Or perhaps there was a village with an abundance of refuse the birds liked—but villagers might not be friendly. Sure that Hudgens was on his guard now, taking his musket in hand, Felix released him, and they crept slowly forward, side by side. The first thing that gave them a dreadful inkling of what they'd find was a splintered spar, wrapped in ragged canvas. Spiderwebs of frayed cables began to festoon the trees. Then they saw the trees themselves had suffered like those around *Mary Riggs*.

"Lord protect us!" Hudgens hissed, whipping his musket to his shoulder. He didn't fire. Hundreds of colorful birds—and not birds—crawled on a human corpse lying in the ferny needles near the path, ripping clothing and tearing bloody gobbets of flesh. The things were utterly absorbed in their meal, pausing only to fight over the choicest morsels. And beyond that first horrible sight, Felix and Hudgens found another, and another, until they came to a clearing created by the far more shattered wreckage of another ship, surrounded by what looked like *hundreds* of bodies, all buried in colorful, riotous mounds of feasting creatures.

"Lord have pity on 'em," Hudgens murmured. "It's *Xenophon*!"

"How can you tell?" Felix whispered sickly. "The ship's . . . upside down!" It was true, for the most part. The vessel had impacted at least as hard as *Mary Riggs*, but also broken in half. The bow was perfectly inverted and even more collapsed than the other ship after all the ballast and cargo crashed down and blew out the sides of the hull. Anyone in it or on it would've been mashed to paste. The stern was a splintered chaos of ragged timbers splayed out around flattened, whalelike ribs, and the rudder dangled from the sheared-off trunk of a broken tree. Felix fought an urge to vomit. He'd never seen anything so violently destroyed before—and that included the bodies being ravenously devoured.

"I lived near Southampton an' watched ships come an' go most o' me life, didn't I?" Hudgens hissed angrily. "Even as she is I can tell she was another old whaler, an' that makes her *Xenophon*. Aye, an' the blow must've overturned her before she fell." He shook his head and practically shivered. "Thank God for Captain Holland or we'd've ended the same."

Even as they stood there—live versions of the things the flying creatures ate with such frenetic relish—they were ignored because they were upright and moving. But that might've caught the attention of other things. Something almost as tall as a man suddenly rose up from within the thunderous flock of carrion eaters and stared directly at them.

"That's no bird!" Felix exclaimed with a rising voice. Its shape and posture might've resembled a bird's, and it was covered with a kind of feathery brown-and-white fur with a short dark crest and tail plumage, but it had powerful arms with long, vicious claws on its hands in place of wings. Its tail was long and whiplike before spiky plumage flared near the tip. The biggest, most horrifying difference, however, was the head. Bobbing like a grackle's on the end of a relatively narrow neck was a head straight out of a nightmare. Large, reptilian eyes glared down either side of a long, narrow snout, jaws bristling with jagged, bloody teeth.

"No, it ain't," Hudgens agreed, taking a small step back. The creature uttered a rasping, guttural bark that cut through the noise of the feeding flyers, and two more just like it raised their frightening heads to regard the newcomers as well. "*Bloody hell*," the artilleryman breathed, obviously frightened but amazingly calm. "We sure found *somethin'*—if we get back to report it."

Bolstered by his companion's composure, Felix took a step back as well,

murmuring, "Whatever you do, don't run." There'd still been black bears in Ohio when he first began to traipse the woods, and though he'd never seen one, men had always told him it was sure to chase him if he ran. That made perfect sense. He'd seen cats chase big dogs when they ran. Conventional wisdom agreed that if he couldn't kill the bear (always preferable in the Ohio of his youth), he should simply ease away. If pursued, he should roar and growl and make himself appear as big and aggressive as possible—and prepare to fight for his life. Often, that would discourage a bear, unless it was a sow with cubs. In that case, there was no telling how it would react. Of course, whatever these things were, they weren't bears. Running still seemed stupid.

The trio of monsters watched them intently as they picked their way back through the shattered trees and rapidly disappearing corpses, all while flying things swooped around them, lighting among others with challenging cries or squirting streams of yellowish shit. They'd almost retreated to the first body they discovered, and one of the monsters had tired of watching them and returned to its meal when Hudgens suddenly stumbled and fell on his backside—right on the edge of the feeding frenzy. The obsessed little diners exploded into flight amid indignant shrieks, snapping and clawing at both men as they took to the air. Hudgens cried out in anger and pain as several attacked his face and he flailed at them with his musket. This regained the full attention of all three larger monsters. Perhaps his shout and thrashing convinced them he was injured. Exploding through their own clouds of greedy scavengers, they came at a trot.

"Jesus!" Hudgens shouted, leveling his weapon. *Klaksh—boom!* The musket roared and downy fuzz sprayed off the side of one of the charging creatures. It squealed and nipped at the graze even as the loud shot sent *thousands* of colorful carrion eaters thundering into the sky. Hudgens was already tearing at a paper cartridge with his teeth as Felix hauled him up. "Should've frightened 'em off like that when we first arrived," he snapped furiously, likely embarrassed as well, as he primed his piece with a small portion of powder from the cartridge before pouring the rest down the .69 caliber barrel and stuffing the paper-wrapped ball down after it with his fingers. He was just drawing his shiny steel ramrod when the flock of swirling bird-things cleared enough for the men to see they hadn't frightened the bigger monsters at all and they were right *there*.