

This chapter was deleted from the final manuscript of

The Larion Senators, Book 3 of the Eldarn Sequence.

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www.eldarn.com

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

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‘Who’n hell is that?’ Charles whispered.

‘Shut yerself up, Fulsom,’ Sergeant Wilkes was irritated. ‘Ya wanna git mornin’ duty? Close yer eyes, dippy shit, ’n’ git back t’ sleep.’

Charles risked another exchange, whispering, ‘I seed chick’n guts, tho’. That was Longstreet and Kershaw. Semmes was wid’em. This ain’t good fer us, Sarge, nosiree.’

Robert Wilkes raised himself up on an elbow. He was younger than Charles Fulsom by three years, but he knew enough to keep his head down when officers rode through camp in the hours before dawn. ‘Fulsom, I’m fixin’ t’ wear myself ragged, beatin’ your hide if y’all don’t pipe down right now.’

‘Sorry, Sarge, sorry.’ Charles rolled onto his stomach. It was hot, already in the seventies, and humid; the sun wouldn’t be up for at least another half hour. Like most of the soldiers in their platoon, Wilkes and Fulsom had slept outside their tent in hopes of keeping cool. Peering from beneath the trees along Seminary Ridge, Charles watched as a few wisps of morning fog scudded across the meadow between their position and the Union line in the east. His bladder was full and he felt his bowels clench. Collywobbles again. The last time had been at Chancellorsville; Charles had shat himself the moment Confederate cannons began firing behind them. A man who had never been positioned in front of an artillery brigade had no idea what those resonant waves of throaty explosions could do. Soldiers had crippling sinus pain, ear- and toothaches and soiled trousers before the day was done. Charles wasn’t looking forward to another skirmish fought waist-deep in his own shit.

‘Sarge?’ he ventured softly.

Longstreet, Kershaw and Semmes had ridden on so Wilkes answered, ‘What now, Fulsom?’

‘I gotta go.’

‘Well, go then. Anderson and Farmer dug a new pit fer us las’ night. It’s back b’tween them tents, b’hind the artill’ry.’

‘I ain’t goin’ back there, I won’ make it that far, Sarge.’

‘Good Mother o’ Christ, Fulsom, whadd’ya want me to do, hold yer hand?’ He sat up. A few of the others began to stir as well. Somewhere to the west, one of the artillery gunners tuned a fiddle. ‘Go on over in the brush back there. Ain’t light yet, so no one’s gonna see ya.’

‘I’m outta paper.’

Sergeant Wilkes rested his head on his forearm. ‘Use some leaves, Charles. Fer Chrissake, does yer Mama chase you around wipin’ yer ass fer ya? Fig’re somethin’ out fer once on yer own.’

‘Well, but Sarge, I—’

‘All right, all right, y’ great baby.’ He dug irritably in his pack, withdrew a handful of newspaper and tossed it across. ‘There, take that, an’ don’ tell me it ain’t enough, cuz it’s all y’all’re gettin’.’

‘Thanks, Sarge, thanks. I jus’ don’ want it to be like las’ time, ya know? I mean, wid them cannon right there an’ all. I’d jus’ as soon be empty.’ He rose with a groan and slipped into a brambly stand of raspberry bushes.

Sergeant Wilkes rubbed the last of the sleep from his eyes and dug back into his satchel. ‘I s’pose y’ got a point,’ he said, more to himself than to Charles. ‘Might as well git it over with now while there’s time.’ He grabbed a handful of newspaper, a larger handful than he had offered the nervous private, and scrambled into the brush himself.

Slipping free from his suspenders, Wilkes unfastened his trousers and folded them carefully down to the tops of his boots, tucking the looped suspenders inside the legs so there was nothing loose to dangle on the warm Pennsylvania ground. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d enjoyed a solid bowel movement, like most of the men in Kershaw’s brigade.

Robert Wilkes missed South Carolina; the sultry ocean breezes felt like an eternity from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. But he was a loyal follower of Brigadier General Joseph Kershaw, and he’d been with the skilled, if often drunk, South Carolinian tactician since Manassas Junction, and he would fight for him and his brigade until the war ended and they all returned home together. Over the foetid aroma of his thankfully brief morning ritual, Wilkes caught the scent of burning tobacco.

‘Fulsom?’ he whispered. There was no answer from the raspberry patch. ‘Charles? Are y’all done in there?’

The leaves and ground cover rustled noisily and Wilkes watched as the raspberry bushes began to quiver, as if Charles was trying to shake the fruit loose.

‘Charles,’ Wilkes said, ‘c’mon outta there now. Y’all cain’t be eatin’ them berries anyway, not with the wobbles like y’ got ‘em. Christ, y’all be shittin’ all day. C’mon, let’s go.’

Another rustle.

Wilkes pushed through the brambles and ducked inside the thicket. ‘C’mon Charles. I need me some baccy – doncha know that feller from the fifteenth . . .’ His voice trailed off as the waft of sweet Carolina tobacco was lost in a wave of grim foulness quite unlike anything Sergeant Wilkes had ever encountered, even on the battlefield. ‘Great merc’ful God, Fulsom, wha’cha been eatin’? Y’ smell like the ass-end of an expectin’ elephant.’

Charles gave no response, but the bush quivered uncontrollably.

‘Christ,’ Wilkes said aloud, ‘he’s havin’ some kinda attack.’ He reached through the thick bushes for what he guessed were Charles’ shoulders and heaved him bodily through the brush. Though he gagged at the stench, the young private was easier to shift than he’d expected – the boy felt like he needed a good meal or two inside of him. Wilkes could see something strange on the ground Charles had been using for his impromptu latrine: like tar in a pit, only this was pale and glowing. There were bubbles here as well, intermittent pops of incandescent ivory.

‘Mother of God,’ he whispered and dropped Charles. He knelt beside the still-twitching body and leaned over the ivory pool, holding his breath. There was no heat coming from it, just the unholy stench of a thousand rotting corpses.

When Charles finally went still, Wilkes ignored him. He was transfixed by the gurgling ivory tar pit. He watched as one bubble swelled to two, then three times its size,

refusing to burst. He leaned closer, imagining he might touch it, discover what curious anomaly haunted the forests along Seminary Ridge, when the bubble – now more a glowing, bulbous wave – sprang with inhuman speed and grabbed his wrist.

The almor yanked Sergeant Robert Wilkes onto his face with such force that the man's neck snapped like a dry twig. The demon absorbed him slowly, almost lazily. It had been ravenous when it arrived in this foreign forest, for the trip across the Fold, though quick, had been tiring, leaving it with a blinding hunger. The first soldier was ingested in a moment, temporarily satisfying the creature, but the second was a welcome addition to the demon's morning feed. Leaving the vacant gray-clad husks in the underbrush, the almor used the root system of the raspberry bushes to make its way south and then east. It was hunting the one with the Larion magic.

Jed Harkness dropped his pack and collapsed. The newspaper correspondent who had been walking along with him sat heavily beside the weary soldier.

'Are we here?' James Hilton asked. He looked absurdly out of place alongside the men of the Twentieth Maine Infantry, his overly dressy white shirt open at the neck, his gabardine pants neatly pressed, his soft leather boots highly polished, as was the tan leather bag with shiny brass buckles he carried. He was obviously not one of the handful of soldiers who had endured a gruelling forced march from Hanover to join the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg.

'I think so,' Harkness said, 'wherevah heah is.'

'They were fighting here yesterday?' Hilton asked. He had no discernible accent.

'Ayuh, if yuh believe the scuttlebutt.' Harkness rolled over far enough to nudge another soldier resting on his pack beside the Taneytown Road. 'Jake.'

'Huh?'

'Whaddyuh say? You make the fi-ah, and I'll brew up the sludge?'

'Deal.' Jake heaved himself up and gazed along the line. North of their position, sporadic watch fires interrupted the pre-dawn gloom, but apart from the rear picket guard, the soldiers from Maine had yet to encounter anyone. 'Don't look like much of a battlefield.'

Harkness nodded. 'Maybe we'ah back pluggin' Meade's arsehole. Who knows? The colonel rode on ahead, I seen him go. He'll find out somethin'.'

Jake wandered into the woods, pausing here and there to pick up dry branches. Behind them a wooded hill loomed above the roadside, blocking any view to the west, where Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was supposedly encamped.

Hilton squinted at his rudimentary map in the dawning light. 'If this is the Taneytown Road, and we're on the southern flank of Meade's army, then we're about a mile out of town—'

'Ayuh,' Harkness interrupted, 'jus' like I said, pluggin' Meade's backside on this one fer certain.'

Hilton went on, 'And that hill might be Little Round Top, or maybe Sugar Loaf. If you look over there you can see where that ground drops off to the west, that'll have to be Cemetery Ridge, or maybe Cemetery Hill; I don't know. We'll be able to see better in a few minutes.'

Harkness nodded; he didn't seem to care.

Twenty minutes later, a cheery campfire crackled and popped. Hilton could smell the first hints of roasted coffee wafting from Harkness' tin percolator. The sun had risen far enough that he could read his map properly and the two men considered their position in relation to where rumour had the rest of Meade's army forming a curving, north-south line the previous afternoon.

'Wheah did yuh get such a mayap, anyways?' Harkness asked.

'Harrisburg,' Hilton said.

'I thought y'all was from that newspapah in Philadelphiah?'

'I am,' Hilton stammered, 'I . . . uh, was in Harrisburg, because we'd heard that with Lee's first offensive north of the Pennsylvania border, he might be targeting Harrisburg, the highways and rail lines that pass through there.'

Harkness shrugged. 'Ayuh, I s'pose. That's bigger thoughts 'n' I have on things.'

'But I am interested in your thoughts too, Mr Harkness,' Hilton said, drawing a notepad and a roughly sharpened pencil from his bag.

'Why?' Harkness poured coffee into three mugs and handed one to Jake.

Hilton took the third, held it beneath his nose and inhaled the glorious aroma of woodsmoke and roasted beans. 'What's that?'

'Why so innerested in what I think? I mean, who am I? You oughtta be interviewin' the colonel.'

'I will,' Hilton assured him. 'He's a busy man, but I'll catch up with him, maybe later today.' He licked his lips. 'Great coffee, Mr Harkness, truly.'

'Codswallop, Mr Hilton, but I do thank'ee for the kind words regardless.'

'I think it tastes like warm donkey piss,' Jake interrupted.

'Well now, no one asked you, did they?' Harkness laughed.

Hilton set the cup on a flat rock near the fire and returned to his notebook. 'Tell me, Mr Harkness, how do the men feel that General Meade will address . . .' he trailed off as he realised Harkness was no longer listening. Following the soldier's gaze, he looked down the Taneytown Road to see a lone figure in civilian clothes, walking north along the Union line.

'Who'n the hell is that now?' Harkness wondered aloud.

'Dunno,' Jake answered. 'Looks kinda like him, though.' He nodded towards Hilton.

James Hilton sighed. 'I know him.'

'He work with y'all?'

'Yes.'

Harkness frowned. 'Seems kinda strange, two of y'all out here, scribblin' the same story.'

Hilton sighed. 'I suppose it does.' He looked up at the well-dressed stranger who had stopped beside their campfire, seemingly oblivious to the stares from the weary men of the Twentieth Maine.

'Good morning, Fantus,' the man said in near-perfect English.

'Good morning, Harren,' Hilton answered.

'It's time, sir.'

'Why?'

Harren Bonn shook his head in an almost imperceptible gesture: *We'll discuss it later.*

‘Fine. Fine. I’m coming.’ Hilton took inhaled deeply one last time, took a deep swallow and turned to Harkness. ‘Jed, I wish you all the best. Keep your head down today.’

‘Shit, Mr Hilton, a mile outta town? This is prob’ly all we’ll do today. I’m bettin’ we walked all that way fer nothin’.’

‘It was nice, all them people cheerin’, though,’ Jake said, reaching for the percolator.

‘Ayuh, that it was,’ Harkness agreed. ‘Good luck, Mr Hilton. I hope y’all get yer story.’

The Larion Senator followed the apprentice Harren Bonn south along the Taneytown Road. They rounded the first blind corner and slipped into a stand of trees, unfurled the Larion far portal and stepped into the spell chamber at Sandcliff Palace.

The almor was left to hunt, unaware that its prey had re-crossed the Fold for ever. It would be called back to Eldarn soon enough, and in the meantime, the rolling Pennsylvania meadows would provide bountiful hunting.