A Prelude to Damnation

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1.

When the young soldier died—one John Elliott of New Hampshire, who claimed to be sixteen but couldn't have been more than fourteen if he tacked on the time he'd spent in his mother's womb—Aloysius Whitten decided he'd had enough, and come what may, he'd try to escape. He'd been there since the camp opened four months before, since that first train had shipped them from Richmond in February, and during the first weeks he'd been silent, holding onto the tenuous belief that they'd be exchanged, returned to their regiments, and sent back to fight. Then he'd met John Elliott and lost himself and the hours of tedium common to prison life in caring for the boy. Not that John's presence had made him more sociable. He spoke just enough to form a pact with the men in makeshift tents around him, protecting their personal effects from the raiders in their midst. Yet the boy's arrival had changed him, had given him a confidant, someone with whom he conversed, even if his neighbors heard only a gruff baritone rasp. They believed he told the boy stories, perhaps gave advice, and on the night John Elliott left this world for good, Whitten talked into the evening air in soothing whispers.

For a few hours, the boy had groaned and whimpered and cried out, and then he stopped, but Whitten continued to talk, speaking to the corpse while wiping its face with a damp rag, clearing the black soot from the pine fires and murmuring what the men supposed was a prayer for the dead.

"And though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," they imagined him saying, as their ministers back home said when they buried a loved one. The bond they'd formed, the others understood, had been that of an older brother for the younger, and as happened whenever an older brother let the younger fall prey to some peril, they knew Whitten believed he'd failed the boy. Thus, for a while they watched, observing his silence. Then, out of respect, they prepared the body, tying the boy's toes together and folding his small hands across his chest before they carried him to the south gate for burial.

If it hadn't been for the boy, Whitten might have tried to escape earlier, but it wasn't likely they'd both have made it past the guards, evading the dogs that would be sent after them if they reached the swamps beyond. Lord knew he'd invested in it, helping to dig the nearby well the men had used, not for water, as their captors had allowed, but for cover, and he could have been among the first to risk leaving, but he declined. Over the course of six weeks, the men had tunneled under the walls, working into the dawn, but after the break six nights before, all those who'd gone had been recaptured or shot while fleeing into the woods. Whitten wasn't a fool. The sheer number who were aware of the tunnels made taking them a dangerous option, and if another prisoner didn't decide to reveal the tunnels' whereabouts to gain favor with the guards, the volume of inmates traveling through in one go would inevitably lead one of them to sound the alarm. Anyone hoping to free himself had to have a head start the tunnels didn't provide. He'd also have to keep it to himself, and even before the boy's condition worsened, Whitten sought alternate routes.

Of course, this didn't stop him from using his strength on behalf of those who chose to dig, those who yearned for their wives and families, those who hadn't had a decent meal since they'd arrived at the gates and received rations of unsifted cornmeal and semi-rancid bacon and were now wasting away for lack of nourishment. Night after night, he dug with steady hands, and, despite having told them he wouldn't be going, this effort gave his co-conspirators a reason to overlook his profound silence, to avoid questioning why a man in constant company rarely uttered a word and never shared who he was or where he'd come

from. He'd worked so hard, in fact, that he'd earned his neighbors' respect, even among those who'd had no part in building the tunnels, which is why they took care of the boy this way: relieving Whitten of the duty of carting him to the death house and braving the foul smells that changed, as they neared the South gate, from feces and perspiration to rotting flesh.

It was a terrible way to go, they all agreed: the infection, the fever. John Elliott had wandered over the dead line—the line they couldn't cross at the risk of being shot—while chasing a scrap of notepaper, and he'd been nicked by a warning shot. The wound had bled little. It had hardly scraped the surface, but in camp, even the smallest cuts had to be closely cared for, lest they fester and grow septic like the boy's had. Whitten had cleaned the wound, wrapped it with a poultice, but in the end, his efforts were in vain. The infirmary was full and they couldn't take him, and Whitten had to make do with comforting his friend.

"You think he told the boy where he hails from?" one asked, as the two men who'd volunteered to carry him shifted the body's weight between them. "I haven't a notion," the other said, breathing heavily through his mouth. "But unless you know how to talk to the dead, it doesn't matter, does it?"

Life in the camps was dull, and most prisoners, when they weren't ailing, told tales of home or the battles they'd fought in. When that failed, they'd speculate on men like Whitten, men who were tight-lipped and didn't reveal much. The more creative ones invented a shadowy criminal history in which Whitten was a cutthroat or confidence man. The truth was far simpler. Whitten was a pro-Union Southerner who believed secession was disrespectful to everything his father and grandfather had worked all their lives for. He'd traveled north at the war's outset to join the effort with the Army of Ohio, his father having the foresight soon after secession to send him to enlist before Rebels blocked the borders. He'd crossed the lines to fight on behalf of his ideals, and he didn't want the Northerners he'd served with to recognize his Tennessee accent and look on him with suspicion or contempt. Still, to those who'd fought at his side on the battlefields, neither his origins nor his accent were any concern. As a soldier, he was among the most ferocious they'd encountered, and anyone who fought on his side was glad he was fighting for them and not the opposition.

"You should have seen him at Chickamauga," said Winston Meade, who'd been in Whitten's company. "Before they took us in, he must have killed at

least ten. And that was after he'd run out of ammunition. Snapped his bayonet off between one of those Reb's ribs and when he saw it, he flipped his rifle and smashed another's face in."

And while this account might have been exaggerated, Whitten had, in fact, killed two Rebs with the butt of his rifle. His neighbors asked him about it, but he glowered and ignored them. Some had their doubts, but come spring, after they'd been there a month and Meade had died of dysentery, they no longer needed proof of Whitten's prowess. They witnessed it firsthand when John Elliott entered the grounds and three of the camp's raiders cornered him and threatened to take the boy's valuables—the brass buttons from his uniform, greenbacks he'd hidden in his boots, his rations for that day.

John Elliott hadn't been a drummer boy, though because of his downy cheeks and wide blue eyes, they'd all thought him one, roaming the cramped dirt aisles between their tents, searching for a place to set up camp. He looked nervous, and as the thieves, one of whom bore the ignominious mark of a punished raider's half-shaved head, surrounded him like jackals, those watching feared for his safety. He'd been captured at Olustee two weeks earlier and sent by train to the prison, but no one he'd traveled with stepped forward to claim him, and the onlookers, having not yet formed a coalition to combat the thefts, weren't likely to risk themselves with three-to-one odds. To his credit, the boy was stalwart as the man with the shorn head and his goons backed him into an alcove between a row of pinewood lean-tos and pinned his arms. He tried to tear lose from their grasp, but the leader struck him across the mouth, and he stopped struggling, silent, a defiant sneer on his face. The boy had a fighting spirit, but he couldn't hide his alarm when the leader revealed a crude, rusting shiv and raised it to the boy's throat. The boy trembled as the point pressed hard into his flesh, and when it became too much to bear, his legs, hovering inches above ground because of the goons' grip, thrashed out, knocking into the fabric of the closest tent. No one realized, not the men watching nor the raiders, that they'd backed John Elliott right into Whitten's lodgings, and as Whitten emerged, the fear shifted from the boy to his captors.

Whitten wasn't the tallest man in the camp, but he was larger than most, of a muscular build, and his reputation, which had begun with Meade's tales, had spread rapidly throughout a populace with little else to pay heed to. The leader lowered his shiv and stood still like a startled raccoon. The goons, awaiting his

orders, let the boy go, but Whitten didn't hesitate. He dropped the man with one swift blow, hitting the leader's windpipe with the flat of his fist and snapping the arm that held the shiv. One of the goons, as if appealing to Whitten's better nature, put a hand on his shoulder, but Whitten tossed him off and slammed his knuckles into the man's jaw. Three yellowed teeth rattled from the man's lips like tiny kernels of corn hitting the earth. He had sense enough to stay down, picking his shattered teeth from the dirt and crawling away while the third man, seeing what Whitten had done to their leader, scampered off.

The boy was crouched low, a few yards away, but Whitten hadn't noticed him. Instead, he bent over, picked up the shiv, and walked to the ringleader who lay wheezing, clutching for breath. Whitten examined the shiv, as though he'd never seen a finer piece of craftsmanship, testing its jagged edge with the side of his thumb. He knelt down, grabbed a lock from the unshorn half of the man's head, and sliced a segment of scalp, a horrifying wheeze emanating from the man's lips. The raider rolled side-to-side, writhing, and after what felt to onlookers like an interminable span, he lost consciousness. Whitten motioned the boy into his tent and sat on his haunches at the entrance, alert, menacing.

No one would cross him again.

The boy died in the early summer.

2.

What the men didn't know, what neither John Elliott's attackers nor the onlookers could have realized, was that Whitten had seen the assault take form and coalesce. He'd been watching through a tear in his tent's fabric, wishing they'd leave him in peace, and it was only the boy's refusal to cry for help that made Whitten come to his aid once the shiv was pulled. Whitten wasn't one to endanger himself for the sake of others, but something in the boy's demeanor wove its way into his sympathies, and he reacted, knowing that these men posed no threat to him.

Still, in taking the scalp, he'd surprised himself. It was impulse, an act so brutal it ensured his safety once the other raiders heard of it. If they wished to exact revenge, he supposed, they could seek strength in numbers, so he did the same and reached out to his neighbors, protecting himself in the name of their property. Men, he knew, could be manipulated by property. It was how this godforsaken catastrophe had started, but no one left to rot here seemed to remember how it had corrupted them and loosened bloodshed. The men in this

camp had been removed from the fighting and reverted to property and fought again. They considered Whitten unintelligent because of his brute force, but he'd recognized early on that he could use their assumptions against them. He made the scalp his property, and once the flesh dried, he hung the ragged chunk of skin from his belt. He tried to explain to John why he shouldn't be scared, that he meant the boy no harm.

"The folks here, they'll take advantage," he advised. "You have to hit 'em first."

And John Elliott nodded.

He seemed to grasp what Whitten was telling him, but the boy, too, was silent that first week, imitating his host's monosyllabic way with words. It wasn't until Whitten shared his story with John that the boy opened up and spoke of himself.

Whitten's understanding of the lengths to which men would travel in defending what they owned hadn't come from an inherent understanding of how this war had erupted nor had it evolved from a love of money or land or the need for food. His idea of the value of things had formed from a letter he'd carried with him since the early days of the war, since that first Christmas when the news came that he was the only male left bearing his family's name.

My dearest son, the missive read in his mother's florid handwriting. *It is with great sadness in my heart that I take up the pen today. I have wrestled with the question of telling you this, but your father and I raised you to value truth above all else, and I cannot conceal the woe that blackens my days, as I am sure it will blacken yours in the months ahead. Your father and grandfather, in the late months of this year, have passed from this Earth into God's kingdom, the circumstance of which I will relate here, as best my poor soul has the power to transcribe with an honest voice and the imperfect instrument of ink.*

He'd stopped there, fearing the tears he might shed in front of other troops, but when he returned to his tent, he pulled the letter from his pocket and continued. His mother had schooling and she'd tried to teach him, but he'd never had her poetry. As his eyes scoured the page, they filled with his father's face and his grandfather's grin, with memories of his home. His mother explained how his father and grandfather, at the Union army's behest, had joined an insurrection bent on disrupting Rebel movements in the hills surrounding their farm.

"It was early November," he told John Elliott almost three years later. "They

burned a railroad bridge, and it fell straight down into the river below. They had to hide up in the hills. Made the Rebs steaming mad." He held the tattered letter on his lap and caressed it. "Granddaddy died of a fever just a week or so after that, and my daddy, well . . . "

He handed the letter to John.

It told how the Rebs caught his father and the other men responsible and gave them a swift sentence and execution. His father had fought the Mexicans down at the Rio Grande in the '40s, and his grandfather had fought the Brits way back in 1812, and they'd both fought the Indians, all in the name of their country, and there they were in their country, in the Tennessee they'd helped to build, and they'd been treated as traitors—his father left to swing, dangling for four days, accumulating a cloud of flies and maggots in the dead of winter, his flesh black and rotting, a warning against those who might try fighting for a country to which they held allegiance.

At first Whitten was angry his grandfather had gone off, too. What business did a sixty-six-year-old man have running around in the hills playing soldier? He should have been home helping his mother care for the farm. But deep down he knew no one could have kept his grandfather, spry and able-bodied as he was, from throwing his lot in with the men who shared his feelings on secession. The letter intensified what had once been a crusade for the Union and made the conflict one of anger and vengeance. He carried the letter into battle, a talisman protecting him and spurring him to kill the men responsible for his grandfather dying in those hills, for his father being hanged. He'd shown them as little mercy as they'd shown his family.

"I joined the cause," the boy revealed when he finished reading, "because my brothers Teddy and Daniel had joined. They're no longer with us. But I endure."

Whitten might have found the boy's way with language intolerable before the war, but in this cramped cesspool of a camp, it brought with it a reminder of civilization. It helped him remember he wasn't a pig or a dog but a man.

The boy folded the letter and handed it back.

"Did you ever have a brother, Mr. Whitten?"

3.

In his younger years, Whitten had indeed had siblings, two brothers and a sister, but none had lived past the age of four, and now with his father and

grandfather gone, it was imperative that he escape and head home to be with his mother. She had no one left but him. He'd had no one but her and John, and now John was gone and he had no reason to linger. He'd only end up wasting away like the rest of them. There was less risk in running. He'd written his mother in February when he'd landed here and hadn't received a response. Rumors that the Northern army had arrived in Atlanta had spread among the prisoners, but Whitten couldn't wait to see if these rumors were true. The lack of news from home had roused his concern.

On the morning he ran, the weather wasn't as bad as he'd hoped. A bit of mist would have made it difficult for the guards to shoot straight, and although rain might have slowed him down or made them cancel his work detail, it would have slowed his captors just as much, erasing his footprints and dulling his scent to confuse the dogs. As it stood, the June day was scorching hot, the sun bright, and the blue sky stretched for intimidating miles, reminding Whitten of the territory he'd have to cross before reaching his beloved Tennessee.

The work details were where the most men who ran met success. The trees in the woods around camp were dominated by pine, and since the commandant, even with slaves on loan from local plantations, didn't have the manpower to provide for his prisoners, he put them to work. They'd forage for kindling and run when the guards were distracted, and the guards, unwilling to jeopardize themselves by going alone, would return to camp, rally a party, and send for the dogs. This gave a soldier the head start he'd need, a head start he didn't get tunneling under the walls and rushing through open fields, rifles bearing down on him, granting the guards a clear shot from the towers above. With the work detail, he'd already be in the forest, and if he was lucky, the guards could take four shots at most before he was out of range. From what the men who'd been caught and dragged back had told him, most guards didn't care enough to take aim, but Whitten couldn't bet on that. He'd have to put a hundred yards between himself and his guard and leg it, conserving enough energy to navigate the swamps to the north. He'd saved half his rations over the week after the boy had passed, stowing them in secret pockets he'd sewn into his pants with a needle and thread he'd bartered for. He also packed the shiv with which he'd taken the raider's scalp and the dried scalp itself, these items serving as relics that proved the boy had lived, that he'd been real and not simply some figment of a hellish nightmare he'd endured.

The morning he ran, Whitten lined up at the gates with the other men on detail and sized up his odds. Ever since the boy died, rage had coiled and nested within the core of his chest, yet even in the deepest rage, Whitten was calm. Rage heightened his awareness and sensitivity. Time slowed. He was quicker in reacting to stimuli than those around him, and this was what made him such a formidable presence on the battlefield, such an efficient killer. He eyed up the dead line and realized they'd be crossing it soon at the sanction of their captors. The rest of the men, their faces blackened from burning, sap-besotted limbs, fidgeted, but Whitten was still, silent, counting the number of guards who'd accompany them when they left the stockade. The prisoners outnumbered their escort by at least three men to a guard, maybe more. One of the guards, a redhead with that pretentious swagger Whitten detested, was the one who'd grazed John Elliott on the day he'd wandered over the dead line.

Since he'd learned his father's and grandfather's fates, Whitten hadn't struggled with anything as intensely as the boy's death. He blamed himself for dropping the letter, for not reaching out to stop the boy's pursuit. He shouldn't have told the boy how much the letter had meant to him, since he wouldn't have chased it otherwise. Yet even in blaming himself, he wanted to kill the guard. He'd seen him from time to time, smiling or laughing with one of the others. He never imagined he'd get close enough to do it, but he now saw that if he did, he'd jeopardize his chance at escape.

The air grew less fetid beyond the gates. Over the months, the men's hygiene had become increasingly worse, until some of them no longer bothered to use the areas designated as latrines and went right outside their tents. Whitten lifted his head to the sun, gauging its position and orienting himself to the north. He inhaled the fragrance of pine and wild grasses and flowers and had to steel himself from sprinting off, snapping the redheaded soldier's neck, and barreling across the open field toward the line of trees where his freedom awaited. His legs twitched at the sight of this open landscape, and he forced himself to a halt, forgetting the soldier who'd killed John and the possibility of vengeance and turning his thoughts to his mother. She was alive and she needed him. He couldn't act in a manner that might imperil his escape. He glanced back, as the gates of the stockade closed behind him. Dead or alive, he'd never pass through them again. The guards brought the prisoners to a halt and sectioned them off into smaller squads before marching them into the woods.

In the shade, it was a few degrees cooler than out in the open, and though the men were sweating profusely, Whitten welcomed the change. If they'd been out longer, the heat would have worn him down, and he had to store what little steam his breakfast provided, not expending himself too much as he bent to the ground, gathering the smallest, thinnest limbs. The men around him seemed to perform the task with the nonchalance of free men. Perhaps it was being beyond the walls that made their steps lighter, relieved of the degradation of being an inmate. Out here, they held their heads high, didn't hunch over like they did on the inside, protecting themselves and their valuables. Rays of light shone through the leaves, splintered and golden, and even as he distanced himself from the shabby, emaciated men, Whitten wondered how many had escape on their minds and how he might take advantage of that.

Needles crunched and twigs broke beneath their feet. From a nearby field came the grunts and conversation of men on detail burying the dead, more graves required with each passing day. The boy was buried beneath that earth, but Whitten couldn't dwell on it now. He had to forget how the boy had whispered, not cried out or pleaded, in his final moments, in that specific cadence of his, "I'd like to go home now, Al," right before the spirit left him. The mosquitoes were out in force. Whitten slapped a few that landed on his neck, and with a miniscule movement of his eyes, checked the positions of the closest guards as he drifted between two trees to obscure himself from sight. His own guard stood twenty to thirty feet behind him, his rifle slung across his chest, ready for use. To the left, fifty yards off, stood another, watching his crew and smoking a cigarette, his rifle a crutch at his side, its butt digging into the earth. Of less concern was the redhead, escorting a group to Whitten's right, nearly a hundred yards away, too far to react quickly to action on this side of the woods. Even at a dash, with his gear and gun, it would take the guard at least ten seconds to respond, and Whitten, less encumbered, could keep that same distance between them. A bullet, he knew, could cover the ground in a split second, but the trees grew close together, the brush was thick, and hitting a target on the run would prove difficult.

Whitten returned to the clearing to maintain his guard's head count, but not so swiftly that he'd draw the man's attention. He put another twenty feet or so between himself and the rest of the prisoners. It was good that they'd stationed the redhead so far away. It removed the temptation, allowed him to

focus. *Forgive me, John*, he thought. He glanced again at the vague outline of the redhead's form in the distance, how he sauntered, the revolver hung low on his hip, cavalier trash. Whitten's rage intensified, but his pulse remained steady. Killing a guard would grant them a reason to hunt him down rather than give him up to the wilderness, let him test his luck in the swamps. He had a better chance of making it home if he refrained from using force, but if a guard blocked his path, he wouldn't hesitate. Once more, he surveyed the prisoners, searching for telltale signs of a break—tension in the muscles, a pronounced nervousnesss—but he saw nothing, no indication that anyone else planned on running.

Instead, he sensed his guard staring at him, hawkeyed, exerting his influence. He refused to give him the satisfaction of looking at him. He was a type, Whitten understood, who liked to flex his muscles, show the prisoners who was in control. Whitten stooped to retrieve a mid-sized branch, and as he expected, this guard, having failed to rouse a reaction, moved on to the next prisoner. The guard to his left, who'd been smoking, rolled another cigarette. Whitten gravitated toward him, blurring the boundary between squads. The ground dipped gradually and then rose upward. If Whitten could break the crest of that hill, there'd be no way to stop him. From behind, he heard the altercation he'd predicted, his own guard yelling at someone who didn't have the sense to avoid his belligerent gaze. Off near the smoking guard, he noticed another man keel over behind a boulder and begin to make heaving sounds.

"Hey, Jim!" A friend rushed to his side. "Hey, Jim, you okay?"

This caught both guards' interest. The first guard stopped yelling and gawked, as the second crushed his cigarette and wandered over to see what was wrong.

Whitten crept across the downward slope to the bank of the hill, crouching low, slinking to where the brush was thickest. He didn't move too quickly, but step by step inched toward his liberation. Yet even as he carefully set down his haul and got ready to run, he heard commotion. He turned to see the sick man right himself and slam a chunk of wood into the smoking guard's face, and the two men, having knocked this guard unconscious, sprinted toward the east. The action surprised even Whitten, but the other guard, Whitten's guard, was prepared. He ran toward his unconscious companion and shook him. Then, finding he wouldn't wake, he placed one knee on the ground to steady his aim

and fired three times. The second shot dropped one of the men, while the other zigzagged and used the natural terrain for cover. Whitten knew that this was his opening to go, but he saw reinforcements running, the redhead clomping with speed to come to this fellow's aid.

The rest of the prisoners, hearing the gun go off, scattered. Some dove behind trunks. Others took to their heels, making it tough to tell who was on a break and who was just scared. *Run*, he told himself, *run, you fool,* but as he caught sight of the ginger locks cascading down his foe's shoulders, his rage simmered to the surface. These were the moments in battle Whitten relished, the melee, the absolute panic that overtook most men and afforded him the time and space to ply his craft, to engage and overwhelm. In a flash, he slid the shiv he'd concealed in his sleeve to his palm, gripped its handle, and when the man came within five feet of where Whitten was hiding, he leapt and plunged the weapon deep into the guard's head. It took him a moment to realize this wasn't the guard he'd meant to kill, that he'd misidentified the man, but by then, his own guard had spotted him and raised his rifle. He fired a slug at Whitten, a slug that ricocheted off a tree and lodged itself in the surface of his shoulder.

If they caught him now, there'd be no quarter. He'd be tried and hanged like his father, so he ran. He ran straight at his assailant, and before the man had time to squeeze the trigger again, Whitten drove the shiv through the hard plating of bone into the top of his skull, lodging the weapon so firmly he had to let go and keep running, deep into the forests beyond, his rage having undone him.