

Long Is The Way

Chapter 1 – Through A Glass Darkly

SMACK SMACK SMACK SMACK SMACK

The thick leather paddle whipped into Owen's bare ass repeatedly. Just when it was starting to feel good, the blonde young woman behind him stopped.

“Are you OK? Am I going too hard?”

“I'm fine, Mistress Jade. Harder, please.”

She'd already asked the question, or some variation of it, at least a dozen times. It was starting to get ridiculous. Her inexperience was showing more clearly with every act. Caution was fine, especially when it was your first session with a new sub, but at some point the Domme has to trust the submissive to use his *safeword* if he needs to. Owen was growing restless and annoyed.

He squirmed on the St. Andrew's cross, repositioning himself slightly as he waited for the next round of blows. His wrists and ankles tugged on the leather ties. They weren't even that thick. Owen knew he could rip them out of the padded boards if he wanted to. It wouldn't even be difficult. Not for a man of his strength.

Owen was 5'10” and two hundreds pounds of well toned muscle. His strong arms, thick legs and chiseled back had been forged through many hard years in the military. Discipline had been the central feature of his entire adult life, so Owen knew when it was being imposed properly. Mistress Jade's voice inspired no fear or awe. Nothing she'd done so far represented even a fraction of the hardship and pain he was used to. And that was the problem.

SMACK SMACK SMACK SMACK SMACK

Another round of increasingly firm spansks belted out. They ceased just as the pain was growing delicious. She stalked around behind him, inspecting his ass and hesitating.

“Hmmm... I think I almost left a welt.”

Owen rolled his eyes.

'Oh yeah, that'd be a real shame...'

“Quite the tough guy, aren't you?” she continued. “Alright then. I'll get the whip.”

“Yes, Mistress Jade!” Owen replied. He smiled at the wall, inches from his face.

'Finally!'

At last, Owen was going to get what he wanted. Their play had built slowly throughout the evening. Upon arriving, she'd ordered him to strip naked. Mistress Jade had demanded foot worship and he'd obediently licked her boots from heel to tip. She'd outfitted him with a collar and leash and walked him around on all fours. The woman in green latex had Queened him for a spell, smothering him with her rubber clad ass.

That was all fine and good. Humiliation and worship had their place. Owen enjoyed most activities that female dominants typically utilized in their play sessions. But that wasn't the real reason he was there. Owen craved pain. His deepest desire was to writhe in agony while bound and helpless. To feel the ever increasing waves of torment until the supernova of endorphins cascaded through his body. He didn't just want it. He needed it.

Owen heard the uncurling of the long leather strand behind him. Mistress Jade swished it back and forth a few times, the whip whistling through the air as she took a few practice twirls. Owen relaxed his body and closed his eyes. He waited for the first delicious slash of stinging leather.

CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK

The whip bit into his flesh with wonderful ferocity and Owen drank real pain for the first time that night. Unfortunately, two of her slashes also landed across his lower back. Maybe she'd been aiming for his ass, but if she was, her aim sucked. There were too many important bones, nerves and organs in that area with little protection. If she did it again...

CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK

Two into his upper back, one into his lower back, two across his ass and finally one along the bottom of his thighs. Low. Much too low. The last one had come close to the back of his knee. If she hit that dead-on, it could put him down for weeks.

'Fuck this.'

“Red! **RED!** We're done!”

His sudden yell startled Mistress Jade, her slender body jolting in the glossy latex cat suit. “Oh! Oh, I'm sorry! Are you alright?”

“Yes, yes, I'm fine. Just untie me, please.”

“Of course.”

The young woman set the whip aside and hurried to his bound form. She undid the thin leather straps around his wrists and ankles. The rattled Domina studied him, looking worried as she set him free.

“Did I hit a bad spot?” she asked as Owen turned around and immediately headed for the door.

“Almost” he answered over his shoulder.

Owen walked down the hallway and turned into the bathroom where his clothes were waiting. He

dressed quickly, relieved himself and washed his hands before heading out.

As he approached the front door Mistress Jade was waiting for him. Her arms were crossed below her shiny bust. She looked mortified. "I'm really sorry. It's just... Well, I'm kinda new at this. Still learning the ropes."

"Ya don't say?" Owen replied. He met her warm hazel eyes briefly before reaching for his wallet.

He'd already paid for the session in full, but on the table nearby was a tipping receptacle beckoning him. Beside it was a small sign that read: *All tips are appreciated! =)*

Owen wished he had a note that said: *'Don't endanger people's spine and ligaments.'* That would've been a fitting **tip** to go with the fifty dollar bill he tossed into the glass bowl.

"Thanks. Have a good night" he said with a nod to the young blonde.

She opened the front door, biting her lip as she did. "You too. Thanks for coming! I'll do better next time."

"Yeah, next time..." he responded with a gruff chuckle as he walked into the night.

* * * * *

Owen felt relaxed for the first time that evening as the effects of the booze started to kick in. He'd been waiting to take his second shot of the night as he listened to the laughing and conversations around him. There weren't that many patrons still at the *Tin Gimlet Lounge* at this hour on a week night, so it was easy to single out voices behind him. He downed the remnants of his drink and knocked on the counter before nodding to the bartender.

"I'll have another, Chuck. When you get a minute."

"Of course" the bald man smiled and attended to him right away. He set down the glass he'd been cleaning, picked up the bottle of Jack and poured another shot with skillful ease. The stout, burly bartender set it down in front of him with a grin. His mirthful expression faded as he reflected on how glum one of his regulars had seemed all night.

"You OK, Owen? You look like your dog just died."

Chuck was the perfect bartender. Not just because he knew how to toss bottles around and fix a million drinks, but he was great at reading people. He knew when to give you distance and when his customers wanted to talk. Owen never would've admitted it, but he definitely wanted someone to chat with. He'd thought about texting his buddies and seeing what they were up to, but decided against it. Owen didn't want to infect anyone else with his mood. But Chuck was always there to listen and he considered it part of his job.

"Yeah, I'm alright. Just... my other vice didn't work out, so I came here for the second best thing." Owen held up the glass of golden whiskey in salute.

“Your other vice, huh? What's that? Gambling? Coke? Women?”

The amused soldier smirked and nodded, confirming his last guess. “Third time's a charm.” He set the drink back on the counter and sighed.

“Ah, sorry it didn't go well. You'll get her next time.”

“I'm hoping she gets **me** next time.”

“Gets you how?” he looked confused.

“You know... understands me. There was no chemistry with this one, that's for sure.”

“Ah, yes. That's always a risk when meeting someone new. Well, I hope the next one is a better match.”

Chuck disappeared briefly to serve another customer. He was back in no time, eager to converse and cheer up one of his favorite patrons.

“So what do you think of this?” he asked, pointing to the TV behind him above the bar. “That's good news, right?”

“What news?” Owen asked, glancing up at the screen with a furrowed brow. He rarely paid attention to the talking heads and corporate propaganda mills.

“You didn't hear? The president announced we're pulling out what's left of the troops. Everyone's coming home!”

Owen snorted. “You really believe that?”

The bartender shrugged. “Why wouldn't I? We've been there way too long if you ask me.”

“Exactly” Owen responded before taking a sip of his whiskey. “We've been there for twenty years and they've been saying we're leaving for twenty years. They all say *mission accomplished* and that we're leaving. We never do. Not really.”

“But they've begun bringing the boys home. It's pretty official, isn't it?”

Owen shook his head. “They pull us out, they push us back in. We're America's **big dick**. The re-deployments don't get nearly the same coverage as the withdrawals do. Even if every last soldier was pulled, there'd still be contractors there fighting. Most of them are former soldiers getting paid way more to work security for some big corporation. And they no longer have to follow the UCMJ.”

“UCMJ?”

“The Uniform Code of Military Justice. It's what prevents us from doing heinous shit. At least, in theory.”

The barkeep looked dejected. He folded his arms over his chests. “So, we're just gonna stay there

forever?”

“Pretty much. Until they launch a more profitable war.”

Owen let the silence linger a few moments as some suit prattled away on the television. His gaze morphed into the thousand yard stare as he fought off unpleasant memories.

“The war is not meant to be won” he recited. “It is meant to be continuous.”

“Hey, isn't that from a famous book?” Chuck asked, as he mopped the counter top with a wet cloth.

“You're thinking of 1984 by George Orwell” the young man answered.

“That's right” the older man said with a nod and a smile. “They made me read that in high school. I thought I remembered the line!”

Owen held up his shot glass. He moved it into position so the amber spirits overlaid the TV. He watched the president, surrounded by generals, make his announcement. It cut to some overpaid stenographers chattering on about the '*big news*.' The dark liquid sloshed back and forth, discoloring and distorting the lying monsters on the screen. Viewed through this lens, the bullshit was almost tolerable.

He brought the drink to his lips and downed it. That wonderful, unique smoothness of Tennessee whiskey slid down his gullet and washed his every care away. He smacked his lips and let out a refreshed sigh of contentment. Owen knocked on the bar lightly with the empty shot glass.

“But it's a misattributed quote. It's actually from the movie. A re-wording of something from the novel.”

“Oh...” the bartender responded, suddenly doubting his own memory. “Shows you what I know! You want another?”

“If I can still say *misattributed* without slurring, I'm way too sober.”

“I'll take that as a yes” he replied with a chortle. Chuck reached for the bottle of Jack again.

“Bet you anything they'll be sending me back within six months” Owen added as he watched the drink being poured. “There or some other hell hole. They always do.”

The sympathetic barkeep placed the drink in front of him. “In that case, this one's on the house.”

Owen smiled. He could tell the man wanted to reach across the bar, grab his shoulders, shake him and demand to know why he kept going back. Why Owen would march into the shit when he knew so much of it was lies, greed and pointless suffering. But Chuck didn't. The unassuming gentleman with the shiny head just listened, poured drinks and commiserated.

“You're a good man, Chuck” he said as he lifted his glass.

“So are you, Owen. Don't forget it.”

The young soldier nodded with sad eyes and downed another shot. If only he could believe that, there'd be no need for another drink.

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Owen stood, examining the the decor of the meeting room. He paced back and forth as he waited for the doctor to join him. It was a small, private practice that Dr. Elizabeth Long had founded. Only one assistant and a few rooms. That's exactly how Owen wanted it. The fewer people involved in this nonsense, the better.

The room contained two arm chairs, a sofa and a coffee table between them. The walls were lined with a few framed works of art and some of Dr. Long's credentials. She had a doctorate in Psychology and several accolades from the various schools she'd attended. There were large potted plants in two corners of the room, giving it a homey feel. The place was clean as a whistle. Owen wagered it would even pass an army inspection.

He heard the door open behind him and turned to see a gorgeous young woman enter. In her heels, she had an inch or two on Owen. Those glossy black shoes led up to creamy white calves and a tight gray skirt that cut off just before her knees. Above that she wore a white, button-down shirt that flowed around her wide hips, curvy bust and slim arms.

The doctor's long brunette hair slid down the sides of her head in a luscious wave. Her thin, black-rimmed glasses framed sultry dark brown eyes. The woman carried a clipboard and a mug of hot tea as she entered. She smiled as she approached, tucking the clipboard under her left arm and extending her right hand in greeting.

"Nice to meet you, Owen. I'm Elizabeth Long."

The words sang out in the loveliest British accent he'd ever heard. Owen closed his now-open mouth and did his best to regain his composure. He'd expected someone about his age, given that it was a relatively new practice, but not necessarily someone so beautiful. Focusing on anything but her might be difficult unless he was faced away from his new therapist.

"Likewise" he said with a nod, giving her hand a firm, but gentle shake. He never shook a civilian woman's hand the same way he did with his service buds. Those handshakes often turned into contests to see who had the strongest grip. "Should I call you Dr. Long?"

"That's fine or you can call me Liz if you're more comfortable with first names. I don't mind at all."

Owen smiled back. She was incredibly disarming. He'd been reluctant to come to this first session, but he was already warming to her. "Alright doc, thanks."

"Please, have a seat wherever you like."

He scanned the arrangement of furniture, wondering if he should go for the couch or one of the chairs. "Does where I sit say anything about me?"

Elizabeth chuckled and waved him off. “No, just sit where you're comfortable. I like to get to know my patients before I do any psychoanalysis.”

Owen grinned sheepishly and nodded. He took a seat in one of the armchairs and folded his hands in his lap. He suddenly felt under-dressed in his jeans, t-shirt and woodland camouflage jacket. He had to remind himself this was a counseling session and not a date.

“Before we get to it, would you like something to drink? I can offer bottled water, tea or coffee.”

“No, I'm good. Thanks” Owen responded.

Elizabeth took a sip of her tea before setting it on the table and slipping into the chair opposite him. She crossed her legs smoothly and leaned back before un-clipping her pen and giving it a click.

“So, what brings you in today?”

“Precaution on the part of the US Army. They do a health assessment after each deployment and my last one was flagged during the debrief. The doctor who went over it decided he wanted me to talk to someone. I need to get the *all clear* before my next tour.”

Elizabeth nodded as she jotted down some notes. “I see. Did the military offer you one of their own counselors to talk to?”

“They did, but I decided to see you instead. The way I see it, the Army already knows enough about me. I'd rather keep this stuff private.”

“You don't trust the military's doctors to maintain patient confidentiality?”

“Oh, I trust the doctors plenty. I'm sure they're good people. But it's not always up to them. Who knows who has access to all those records, you know?”

The beautiful brunette wrote a few more lines on her clipboard. “And when is your next deployment scheduled?”

“I won't know until a month or two before it happens. Could be any time.”

“Alright. Well as long as you're not called to action in the next couple months, that should be enough time to make a determination. Now, tell me... What's going on in your life right now? Generally speaking.”

Owen blew air through his bottom lip and raised his arms to the sides of the chair. “I transferred to the reserves after my last tour. Decided I needed a new direction. I'm going back to school right now. Studying history and English lit.”

Elizabeth smiled wide. “How nice! Do you have plans for the degree? Or are you pursuing it purely on interest right now?”

“I don't know. I guess I might be a teacher some day? Or maybe I'll write a book. No firm plans, really.

I already have a bachelor's in economics. Never had a plan for that one either. Just something I did between deployments since the army was paying for it."

"What about family? Friends? Partners? Who's in the picture right now?"

"No partner at the moment. No family either. I entered the military right after high school and my foster parents passed away in my twenties. They were already up there when they adopted me. Was sort of like having grandparents instead of parents. I've got lots of buds in the army, but only a few around here. The rest are spread around the country in between tours."

The young doctor's pen continued to scribble away. "Have you been trying to meet new people? At school or social events?"

"Yeah, sometimes. It's kind of hard, especially at school. I feel like the old man at college, now. Almost everyone's twelve to fifteen years younger than me. I don't really go to a lot of social events, but I've been trying to meet women online. Had a date just the other night! Though, that one didn't work out too great."

Elizabeth nodded. "That's good that you're still reaching out. I know it's not easy, especially for soldiers returning from overseas. Trying to pick up a social life that's been on pause for half a year or more is always a daunting task. It doesn't sound like you have a lot of people in your life right now. Do you find yourself feeling down about that?"

He shifted in his chair uncomfortably. "Well, I mean... I think about it sometimes, but I wouldn't say it's a huge problem. I do pretty well on my own."

The doctor set her pen down and eyed him knowingly. "Owen. I know it can be difficult to open up to someone you barely know, but if we're going to move forward, I need you to be forthright. Anything you say to me will be kept in the strictest confidence and only used to help you, to the best of my ability. So please, tell me plainly. Do you regularly experience feelings of loneliness?"

He paused as her striking pools of succulent brown burrowed into his baby blues.

"All the time."

"Is that something you'd like to change?"

"If I'm being honest, I often think it's for the best."

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WHAP WHAP WHAP

Owen groaned deeply into the leather bit between his teeth. It felt odd to have a gag in his mouth that wasn't strapped tightly around his head. He could spit the long, tubular piece of leather from his maw at any time. That was his **out** if it became too much. He could spit the bit and say the safeword. That's how Madam Payne worked.

His naked body was immobilized atop the black, leather padded bondage horse. Owen's muscles were made useless by a combination of leather straps and chains. His wrists and ankles were secured to the four corners of the metal base on which it rested. Unlike last time, there was zero possibility of his escape until the Domme beating his ass unlocked him.

His bare ass was now a fleshy rainbow of painful colors and streaks. The tortured tissues were inflamed pink and light red, criss-crossed by stripe marks of darker red and welts black. Each time she lashed his ass with the cane, another brutal impression was left in his flesh. This was the kind of discipline that would make it painful to sit for days. Owen's favorite kind.

The best part of his predicament was his swollen testicles, locked in the contraption of leather and metal and stretched downward. Attached to the cruel device were several weights, dangling from his aching scrotum. Each time she struck him, the pain of the blow was matched by the agonizing jolt of his privates.

WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP

“ARRRRRRRGGGGGGGGHHHH!!! AHHHMMMPPHHHMMMMMUHHHHHHH!!!”

The weights clanked behind him as they collided with each other and tugged on his nethers. His arms and legs pulled on the thick chains in utter futility. Owen's eyes crossed as the overwhelming surge of pain flooded his body from head to toe. His body leaked sweat all over the clingy leather. His hair was wet with perspiration, the beads running down his face and dripping from his brow to the floor.

“Really? Not done yet?” the woman asked in a dispassionate voice. “Most of my clients tap out by now. But you're still thirsty, aren't you? Yes, I know your type. It's never enough, is it? It would be impressive if it wasn't so pathetic. Lucky for you, I can do this **ALL. FUCKING. NIGHT!**”

WHAP

WHAP

WHAP

The three lashes ripped into his already brutalized flesh in time with her emphasized words. It was the first emotion the seasoned Dominatrix had displayed all night. Up until now, her instructions had been infrequent and almost clinical. She was cold as ice and her voice dripped with disdain.

“That's it! **Lap it up piggy!** Eat your fill!”

WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP

Her sudden burst of enthusiasm was almost reassuring. Up until now, the woman might have been mistaken for a Femdom android. But what had triggered it? His pain tolerance? Her perception of a challenge? Or perhaps her words were sincere and she truly was disgusted by men like Owen.

It was often hard to tell whether it was an act or the woman he'd hired to torture him was working out her own issues. Dommies who offered this kind of service with this level of skill had fully embraced

their sadism. That much was clear. What remained a mystery was the driving force behind that sadism.

Madam Payne was very well named. She was inflicting some of the most intense agony Owen had ever experienced. To her, it was the simplest thing in the world to reduce him to a gibbering wreck. She needed nothing but practiced flourishes of her thin wooden reed.

That was all well and good, but there was something off about her. Something Owen didn't like nearly as much as the torment she was delivering to his quivering, whipped-raw ass. There was a cruelty that went beyond performance and eclipsed even the giddy indulgence of the sadist. There was scorn in her gaze and it extended to her words and movements.

Some men probably loved that about her. Owen, however, was growing increasingly wary.

WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP

Her powerful blows came fast and steady. The blistering, red hot suffering in his ass was growing exponentially. The arcs of pain shot through his every nerve with every loud slap of her wand. Owen's toes curled and his teeth chomped down viciously on the phlegm soaked bit. He grunted and screamed into the gag with every vicious swat into his burning bottom.

The Domina's eyes were wide with excited glee. The woman cackled as she continued to flay his ass, the business end of the cane biting deep into his flesh. Owen's eyes now ran with tears and his limbs pulled on their bindings fiercely as he yelled into his leathery muzzle.

WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP

His limit reached, the bit flew forcefully from Owen's mouth and the safe word echoed off the dungeon walls.

“MERCY!!! MERCY! Mercy...”

Madam Payne's arm, poised to strike again, lowered slowly. The thrill of torment faded from her eyes. A smile spread across her lips for the first time that evening.

Owen quickly learned that her *after care* regimen extended only to unbinding him and making sure his wounds required no immediate medical attention. With that done, she exited and left him to dress. It was by far the most painful dressing he'd ever endured, followed by an equally agonizing walk up the stairs.

When he reached the top, he turned and entered the foyer. The leather clad Domina was there waiting for him, already smoking a cigarette. Her attire was matched by her jet black hair. Owen estimated she was at least ten years his senior, but she'd stayed in remarkable shape.

The scorn was gone from her eyes now and replaced by something worse. Even after the intense personal experience they'd just shared, she looked at him like he was some kind of wounded animal. A creature to be pitied. If there was a single spark of warmth in her, it would never be shared with Owen.

“Thank you, Madam Payne, for a wonderful evening” he half-lied.

“You're welcome, piggy” she said before taking a drag. She exhaled a wispy cloud from her ruby red lips.

“May I leave you a tip?”

“You may.”

Owen removed a crisp one hundred from his wallet. He left the folded bill near the lamp on her console table.

“Call again any time” her icy voice beckoned him.

He turned and nodded to her before grabbing the door handle and making a hasty exit.

Owen stepped into the darkness and followed the small glowing lampposts back to the parking lot. As he made his way to the car, he decided he wouldn't visit Madam Payne again. Not unless he was desperate for a fix.

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The room was quiet as Owen lounged on his inclined weight bench and stared at his flatscreen. *JAWS* was playing and one of the iconic scenes was coming up. He had a sofa, but he'd gotten used to sitting on his weight bench over the years. He often lifted while watching TV.

He held a half-filled glass of scotch to his chest; the most recent of several that night. He'd been sipping the amber liquid through most of the movie with a pillow lodged under his brutalized bottom. The scotch was the perfect partner not only for his pain, but a scene where a half-drunk sailor was about to give one of the greatest speeches in film history.

Just as Robert Shaw launched into it, Owen's phone rang. He cursed, balancing his drink with care as he reached over to grab it. The blaring device rested on the coffee table near the half empty bottle of liquor. Owen picked it up and quickly answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Sergeant! Where you at?”

“Hey Flash. I'm at home and that's where I'm staying.”

His real name was Howie, but everyone in their unit called him *Flash*. It was a popular army nick for anyone with the last name “Gordon.” It didn't hurt that he was quick on his feet, either. The name fit like a glove. That's how nicknames worked in the military. You didn't get to pick one. You just sort of fell into them.

“Oh cmon! I thought you said we were hanging out tonight!”

“I said **maybe**, but it's not in the cards. I went a little hard on the weights today. Think I pulled

something.”

“Awww, is Sergeant getting too old for a little **PT**?”

“Fuck you.”

“Whatever man! Your loss! Since it's not gonna be a guys night out, I guess I'll just have to find a new girlfriend. There are some **HOT** young ladies in this town, let me tell you! College honeys everywhere!”

“Yeah, and I bet they want nothing to do you with your buck-toothed, thirty one year old ass.”

“That hurts, Sergeant. It really does.”

“Pfft... Go find yourself a date. My date tonight is a bottle of Johnny Walker. I'll be asleep in an hour.”

“You're a real party pooper sometimes, you know that?”

“We'll do bowling and beers soon, I promise. Now piss off! I'm missing the Indianapolis speech.”

“Maybe you haven't heard, but you can rewind shit on Netflix. You can even pause! Just a little tip for ya...”

“Bye, Flash.”

“Later, Sergeant. Feel better!”

Owen ended the call and set his smartphone aside. He slumped back on the weight bench and listened to what was left of the harrowing speech. It was a gruesome tale of desperation and death on the merciless sea. When he'd drained his tumbler, he reached for the bottle and poured himself another drink.

He took a bigger gulp before setting the glass aside. Fittingly, Owen started to sing along with the drunken characters on screen. His drowsiness increased and he closed his eyes, muttering out the same words as the sailors in their dark, ocean-tossed cabin.

*“Show me the way to go home...
I'm tired and I wanna go to bed!
I had a little drink about an hour ago
And it went right to my head!
Wherever I may roam...
On land or sea or foam
You will always hear me singing this song
Show me the way to go home...”*

* * * * *

Another week of classes flew by in the blink of an eye and Owen found himself in Dr. Long's meeting room once again. The ceiling was pure white. Aside from a single fan in the center of the room spinning away and circulating the air, there was nothing to behold but a white expanse. Owen had opted for the couch this time. He was even laying down in the old school fashion of Freudian analysis.

Elizabeth hadn't asked him to, he'd done it voluntarily. Owen had learned, during their first session, that sitting opposite your hot, young therapist and staring at her for an hour could get rather awkward. Not that he didn't love the view. If anything, it was distracting. A woman so sultry she could distract you from her own questions. And yet, every time his gaze became lost in her flowing curves, that wonderful accent snapped him back to reality.

Owen shook his head. He was doing it again. Wandering off mentally and focusing on the wrong things. Even without the doctor in view, she had that effect. She was sitting off to the side in one of the armchairs. Her pen was scribbling away following his previous answer.

"So, it's safe to say you feel conflicted about your time in the military?"

"Yeah. I mean, one the one hand, it's family to me. The only family I've had as an adult. I love the men and women I serve with and the army has given me crazy opportunities. At the same time, I've seen too much to believe in the mission any longer. Not fully. I've done things I'm not proud of. So have many of my friends. It wears on you..."

"We'll delve deeper into that another time, when you're comfortable doing so. I know this isn't easy, especially with someone you've only recently met."

"Sure. Thanks, Doc."

"Of course. Let's return to the present for now. How's the quality of your sleep?"

"Hit and miss. Some nights I sleep like a baby. Others, not so well. The worst nights are when I stare at the ceiling for hours, like I am right now."

"And what are you thinking about when you're awake at night?"

"I don't know... I guess I'm wondering what this world wants from me and what I want from it."

Elizabeth's ballpoint flew across the clipboard, marking the page in a flurry.

"Would you say that's been affecting the quality of your life? That you'd like better sleep?"

"I think I do ok. Way better than some of my squadmates."

"It's not a contest, Owen. I'd like you to refrain from comparing your experience to your fellow soldiers as much as possible. I know that seems odd, when so much of military training is trying to *measure up*, but our time will be focused on you. Your well being. How we can make things better for **you**. I want you to embrace that as the goal."

"Yes, Ma'am. What is it you'd recommend?"

"If you wanted to try a sleep aid, I could get you a consultation with someone who would evaluate your needs. I'm not a psychiatrist, so I can't prescribe medication, but I work with several who'd be happy to help."

"Negative. No drugs. I don't want to get used to taking something right before I'm sent back into the field."

"I understand how you feel, but I want you to tell me if sleep is hampering you in any significant way. Especially if it gets worse. Even the military knows the importance of good sleep, yes?"

Owen snickered. "Yeah, sure they do." If only she knew how often he'd been put through the ringer with little or no sleep.

"There's no shame in taking something to get a better night's rest. Trying something is always an option if you change your mind."

"Noted" he answered curtly.

"Good. Now, tell me... Overall, how would you describe your mood?"

"My mood? I guess, most days, my mood is pretty good. Certainly better now that I'm back home. It's nice not having to worry about IEDs every time you cross the road."

"Is that something you think about often? Worry about?"

"No. I didn't mean to imply that. Believe me, I've seen people who come back and jump at every loud noise. Who rage out over the dumbest little things. I'm not like that. I don't have PTSD."

"Based on what you've told me so far, I think it's likely you don't have **severe** PTSD, but not all PTSD is severe. Even milder forms can adversely affect your life. And if I were to diagnose you with a mild or moderate form of PTSD, I would reiterate that's nothing to be ashamed of."

Owen sighed, but a cheeky grin spread across his face as he did. "Yes, Ma'am."

Elizabeth didn't give an inch. She wasn't putting up with any of his shit. The young doctor felt like one of his old drill sergeants in that regard. This woman was going to whip him into emotional shape, come hell or high water. Perhaps that's exactly what he needed. Especially if he wanted to survive another tour overseas.

"A complete analysis is going to take time, Owen. I know that patience is difficult when you feel like you're under the microscope. Making yourself emotionally vulnerable is hard. It can be especially challenging for men in our society. Perhaps even more so for someone coming from the military. I want you to know that I understand these challenges and I want to help you navigate them."

"With all due respect, doc, I don't know how you could understand my challenges."

"I'm trained to listen, analyze and understand. I've dealt with many cases of psychological trauma, some stemming from war. Without getting too personal, since we're here to talk about you and not me, I'll disclose that I've had family members in the military. I've never been in a combat zone or suffered

its after effects, but I know very well that war is hell.”

Owen said nothing at first, reluctantly absorbing her words. Suddenly, he was reminded of the famous line from Paradise Lost. “Long is the way, and hard...”

“That out of hell leads up to light” Elizabeth finished the quote with him, in unison.

Owen sat up and turned to look at the beautiful doctor. Pleasant surprise was written plainly across her face.

“You've read Milton?”

“I have” he said with a smile. “I'm not minoring in English Lit for nothing. I love the classics.”

Dr. Long's phone began beeping. She leaned forward and tapped the screen to bring the alarm to an end. “And just like that, our second session is done.”

Owen looked at his own watch in disbelief. “Has it been an hour already?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Time flies when you're having fun?”

“Oh, yes, **so much** fun!” he replied with just the right amount of snark to make the doctor laugh. “Same time next week?”

“Yes, and in our next session we're going to have even more fun! You'll need to be at your most courageous, because I'm going to examine your coping mechanisms.”

“Coping mechanisms?”

“How you deal with stress. Particularly any ways that might be unhealthy.”

'...Uh oh.'

* * * * *

Guitar riffs and thunderous drum beats pounded through Owen's speakers, flooding his apartment with one of the great rock anthems of the late sixties. He smiled and tapped his foot as he adjusted the weight plates on his barbell. The spinlocks rattled on and off the ends of the bar in between adding more heft to each side.

*“Some folks are born, made to wave the flag
Ooooh, they're red, white and blue!
And when the band plays "Hail to the Chief"
They point the cannon at you, Lord!
It ain't me! It ain't me!
I ain't no senator's son, no!*

It ain't me! It ain't me!
I ain't no fortunate one!"

The sun flooding through the windows and the impassioned music of Creedence Clearwater Revival weren't the only reasons for Owen's good mood. It was Friday, classes were over, there was only a little reading he needed to do over the weekend and otherwise he was free to enjoy himself. Even better, he had another date setup for tonight and his ass was freshly healed.

Sure, his glutes still bore some scars, but a week of mending along with several applications of aloe vera gel meant they were ready for action. He was eager to drink from the river of anguish again. If her resume was any indication, *Mistress Isabella*, the woman he'd booked an evening with, would have no trouble putting him in his place.

Before that, he would tear into his own arms and legs. There was nothing like crippling his body with exquisite soreness before spending a night with a haughty disciplinarian. After his workout, he would have a quick meal and take a shower. Then he'd be off to meet his third Domina in as many weeks.

Owen stepped over the bench and lowered himself onto it gently. He mouthed out the lyrics as he took position and prepared to lift all two hundreds and fifty pounds from the safety latches. He took a deep breath, gripped the bar carefully and launched into his first bench press.

He groaned as the massive weights lowered down, his biceps straining as he pushed his entire body weight, plus fifty pounds, back up. He breathed in through his nose when the bar lowered and exhaled each time he pressed the weight up. As the burn of tearing muscles ignited in his arms, he likened each brutal lift to the sting of a riding crop on his ass.

"ONE!"

"TWO!"

"THREE!"

* * * * *

The beautiful afternoon had given way to an overcast evening. Now there was steady rain as Owen approached his destination. He proceeded down the street, passing rows of run down apartment buildings. The eager submissive peered through the gloom, looking for the right complex.

Upon finding it, he quickly pulled into the grounds and parked. The grassy concourse was dotted with large trees. A walkway split through the wooded area and led to a long row of ground floor dwellings. Owen spotted his destination in the distance before killing his windshield wipers and lights.

He stepped out into the drizzle, locked the car and hurried down the path. The trees offered some protection as he made his way to the long apartment complex, but his short brown hair was getting a second shower. He trotted down to apartment number eight, pressed the door bell and stood in the rain, hoping his new hostess would answer quickly.

Owen didn't have to wait long. The door opened and he was treated to a sight of unparalleled loveliness. She was an alabaster Goddess wrapped in black latex from head to toe. Her midsection was buckled in a shiny corset, leading up to a generous view of her cleavage. Her shoulders were wrapped in black rubber all the way down to her wrists. Her legs were decked out in luscious leather thigh-high boots. Her brunette hair fell freely around her head. Her lips were the color of the darkest red rose.

It was Elizabeth.

It would have seemed like time stopped, had it not been for the steady sound and feel of drenching rain around him. Owen gazed up at his fetish clad therapist, his eyes wide as saucers.

She stared back, her mouth agape in shock. They said nothing for what felt like an eternity.

"I... Oh my god!" she managed to elucidate.

"Elizabeth..."

"Owen, I--"

Dr. Long was Mistress Isabella. It wasn't surprising that she used a performance name. Most female dominants for hire did. Owen had also used a fake name. Their mutual caution had made this bit of kismet possible.

She placed one hand over her chest, but no other words came. The full impact was still hitting her.

Owen was astonished, but not nearly as much as her. Some version of this had already played out in his dreams. He'd just never dared to imagine that it could possibly come true. There was a good chance it still wouldn't. Would she send him away?

The young soldier couldn't claim to have many grand moments in his life, but he was determined to make this one of them. He reached deep into the well of his mind and summoned forth the finest words he could muster. He spoke them loudly, above the persistent pelting of the rain.

"Before, we saw through a glass darkly. Now we shall see face to face."

Elizabeth's mouth continued to hang open as she stood motionless in the doorway. Was she aware of that obscure passage from Corinthians? Did it matter? The meaning was clear. Their third meeting was their most profound. Their most honest. They were seeing each other, the **real** them, for the first time.

The drizzle intensified. Rivulets of water ran from Owen's hair and trailed down his glistening face. He could do nothing, now, but await her response. They gazed at each other in the rain swept darkness with naught but a porch light to illuminate the truth. They were two lonely hearts, frozen in time.