

Lives Lived and Lives Lost

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/27012268) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/27012268>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/F , F/M , M/M , Multi
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Harry Potter/Tom Riddle , Harry Potter/Tom Riddle Voldemort
Characters:	Harry Potter , Tom Riddle Voldemort , Tom Riddle , Original Characters , Loki (Marvel) , Ancient One (Marvel) , Thor (Marvel) , Willow Rosenberg , Xander Harris , Rupert Giles , Cordelia Chase , Buffy Summers , Faith Lehane , Daniel "Oz" Osbourne , Angel (BtVS) , Spike (BtVS) , Sherlock Holmes , John Watson
Additional Tags:	Reincarnation , Alternate Universe - Reincarnation , Reincarnated Harry Potter , Master of Death Harry Potter , Master of Death (Harry Potter) , Maffia , Alternate Universe - Mob , Minor Violence , Blood and Violence , Gun Violence , Alternate Universe - Fusion , Alternate Universe - Zombie Apocalypse , Zombie Apocalypse , Kamar-Taj (Marvel) , Sane Tom Riddle , Good Tom Riddle , Tom Riddle is Not Voldemort , Character Death , Alternate Universe - Military , Military , Zombies , Dogs , Service Dogs , Disability , Physical Disability , Disabled Character , Disabled Character of Color , Strong Female Characters , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Mental Health Issues , Prosthetics , Alternate Universe - No Powers , Alternate Universe - Muggle , Alternate Universe - Buffy The Vampire Slayer Fusion , BAMF Buffy Summers , BAMF Women , Alternate Universe - Vampire Slayer , Bubonic Plague , Plague , War , Suicide , Suicidal Thoughts , Suicide Attempt , Inspired by The Crown (TV) , Alternate Universe - Royalty , Mentions of Cancer , Grief/Mourning , Implied/Referenced Drug Use , Drug Addiction , Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence , Sherlock Being Sherlock , POV John Watson
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of The To Live Series
Collections:	Harry Potter , Best Harry Potter Crossovers , Magnolia's Re-Reading , Amarillie Harry Potter Fanfictions , Tomarry\Harrymort , Master Of Death , Cherry Lemonade will have spare time eventually! , Best Marvel Crossovers , ZombieLove's Time Eaters , Harry Potter Goes Away (Time travel/accidents/escapes and others) , I promise to reread you 🥺💙 , needssleeps fav fics
Stats:	Published: 2020-10-14 Updated: 2023-01-10 Words: 87,926 Chapters: 14/?

Lives Lived and Lives Lost

by [Maeglin_Yedi](#)

Summary

A series of ficlets depicting some of Harry and Tom's many lives as part of their endless cycle of reincarnation in To Live is the Rarest Thing. Read that story first, or this won't make sense.

Life #154: That time Tom and Harry were mob bosses

Life # 50: That time Harry and Tom were sorcerers in Kamar Taj (with surprise guest stars!)

Life # 90: That time Harry and Tom faced a zombie apocalypse.

Life # 35: That time Harry and Tom were vampire slayers

Life # 73: That time Tom and Harry died of the Black Death

Life # 158: that time Harry and Tom ran a funeral home.

Life # 184: That time Harry and Tom accidentally ended the British monarchy

Life # 143 That time Tom and Harry were A-list actors

Life # 54: That time Harry and Tom were theme park vloggers

Life #101: That time Harry and Tom lived during the last ice age

Life #96: That time Harry and Tom were homeless

Life # 20: That time Harry and Tom were dog groomers

Life # 21: That time Harry and Tom were Holmes and Watson

Notes

I'd been considering adding a series of ficlets about Tom and Harry's many lives they lived in To Live is the Rarest Thing, when some readers started asking for such a series as well.

So, here is the start of it. A juicy ficlet about their life in the New York maffia, spanning quite a few decades.

Some stories will be longer, some shorter. Some will have lots of plot, some will be slices of life. We'll see what I'll come up with next. And yes, in case anyone is wondering, I have a list of all the lives Tom and Harry have lived. Most of those lives aren't fleshed out yet however.

And yes, I will write a ficlet about Harry and Tom's lives as Buffy and Faith eventually. I've got some ideas for that one.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy. Let me know what you think.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Life #154: That time Tom and Harry were mob bosses

Life #154: That time Tom and Harry were mob bosses

Queens, New York, 1936

They met at a party when Tom was twenty-one and Harry was sixteen.

“So,” Harry said, standing with his back to the wall. He gestured around the room with the bottle of beer in his hand. “Guess we’re mobsters this life.”

“Guess we are,” Tom replied with an unconcerned shrug.

All around them, New York’s most vicious criminals were socializing with plenty of alcohol, Cuban cigars and loud stories. The air around them was thick with smoke and filled with raised voices and abundant laughter.

“So what’s your connection?” Tom asked, briefly glancing at Harry.

“My father,” Harry gestured towards a short, corpulent man to the right who was drunkenly hitting on a waitress who seemed not at all amused with the attention. “Joseph Campania. He just became a Captain for the Luciano Family. You?”

Tom discreetly pointed out a tall man sitting to their left, talking with big gestures while all around him men at that table laughed. “My father, Salvatore Colombo. He’s been a Captain for the Maranzano Family for a few years now. I’m Paul, by the way. Paul Colombo.”

“Tony Campania,” Harry said with a quick smile. “Nice to meet ya.”

“Likewise.” Tom fell quiet for a few moments before giving Harry an apologetic look. “I’m married. Her name’s Mia. She’s pregnant with our first. Three more months to go.”

“Congrats,” Harry said sincerely while several opposing emotions whirled through him.

“Hey, I understand,” he added quickly, taking in Tom’s eyes that were shining with regret.

“We’ve been over this, babe, time and again in life after life. There’s no way we could work as two guys in 1930s New York, especially not if we want to work our way up in the mafia. We need wives, if only to maintain our cover of being healthy, hot-blooded, Italian guys.”

“You’re right, of course,” Tom conceded while sipping his drink. Whiskey, as far as Harry could tell.

Harry took a swig of his beer. “I’ve got my eyes on a girl. Lucia. She’s the daughter of another Captain. Pretty thing, but not afraid of anything and rumour has it she can cook like nobody’s business.”

“We should get together some time then, a double date? Mia and I can chaperone for you and Lucia,” Tom said and took another swig, finishing his drink. “I always enjoy going to the movies in this era.”

“Sure, I’d love that.” Harry inhaled a deep breath, letting all his new memories settle and going over everything going on in his current life. “And yeah, there’s something so damned nostalgic about black and white thirties movies, isn’t there? We could have dinner after at Bennie’s, on Linden Boulevard. Great food but not too expensive.”

“It’s a date.” Tom signalled a waitress over and asked her for drinks for them both. Harry quickly finished the last of the beer while the waitress returned after a few minutes with fresh consumptions. Tom gave her a generous tip which she accepted with a saucy wink before darting off.

“So what do you have going on right now?” Tom asked while they both sidestepped a pair of drunken, stumbling guys looking for the can.

“I’m still just an errand boy, just quit school. My mom was pissed, but my dad supports me. Wants to see me do well in the family.” Harry quickly waved at a few guys he knew, who were gesturing at him to come join them. “But I got some small jobs lined up that will hopefully make me a soldier soon.”

“Yeah, you got to get your hands dirty for that,” Tom agreed quietly. “I made it to soldier last year. Took care of a guy who refused to pay back some money the boss loaned him. Gave him cement shoes.”

Harry chuckled while shaking his head. “I can’t believe that’s an actual thing. It’s like we’re living in the Godfather movies.”

“Yes,” Tom agreed with a laugh. “It really is.”

Queens, New York, 1946

Harry had his second son, Paulie in his lap while his oldest, Frankie, sat beside him. The youngest, Luca, sat in Lucia’s lap as they enjoyed the amazing chicken cacciatore Lucia had cooked them. The rumours about her culinary skills were not exaggerated, and Harry had put on thirty pounds at least during the first year of their marriage and he had zero regrets. Anyone tasting her lasagne and tiramisu would agree with him, without a doubt. Even Tom had stopped teasing him once he’d tasted Lucia’s stuffed mushrooms.

There was urgent banging on the front door of their brownstone, two bedroom apartment. Harry was saving up to buy them a house, but so far he’d only made it to soldier and while he made a pretty good income, life in New York with a family, even in the forties, wasn’t cheap.

Harry put Paulie down in his own chair and slid his plate closer. “Finish your dinner, buddy,” he said while pressing a quick kiss to his black curls. With a quick nod at a wide-eyed Lucia, Harry walked into the hallway, pulled open the top drawer of the cabinet and got out his .38 Colt revolver he kept there.

“Who is it?” Harry asked loudly, keeping his gun at his side.

“It’s me,” Tom answered, sounding terribly congested for some reason. Harry had seen him just that morning and he’d been fine.

Harry stuffed the gun in the waistband of his pants and opened the door. "Jesus, what happened?"

Tom was covered in blood. The left side of his face was coated in blood spatters, as was the front of his white shirt and grey coat. "It's not mine. They just wacked my dad in the car while he was stopped at a traffic light. I was sitting beside him. The motherfuckers got away, too."

Lucia came walking into the hallway, Luca on her hip. "Paul, you want me to make you a plate...what happened? You all right?"

"Not his. They got his Pa," Harry quickly said, while gesturing towards the kitchen with his chin. "Keep the kids there, I'll help Paul clean up."

"I don't want to clean up, I want to fucking kill the fuckers who did this," Tom all but growled. "I couldn't even stay with the body because the fucking cops were on their way, sirens everywhere."

"We'll get them," Harry promised, holding onto Tom's elbow and leading him into the small bathroom. He closed the door and locked it. The kids were way too small to see a man covered in blood. "I promise you, I will help you track down the scum that did this, but you gotta get clean. You can't walk around looking like this, pal."

"It was the Valachi brothers, those scumbags. They've been trying to poach on my dad's territory for years. I recognized one of them as they sped away in their car, fucking cowards." Tom let Harry pull off his coat and shirt and undershirt, which Harry stuffed in the garbage can. There was no way to get that much blood out.

There was a knock on the door. Harry opened it a crack. Lucia stood on the other side, holding out a clean shirt and undershirt. "Thanks, sweetheart," Harry whispered while blowing her a kiss. Lucia rolled her eyes but still smiled as she turned to go back to the kids.

"You don't deserve that woman," Tom commented while Harry plugged the sink and filled it with water. They were lucky to have a bathroom with a toilet and running water. It was still considered somewhat of a luxury in those days, but with three kids and a fourth one on the way, it was something Harry was all too happy to splurge on.

"Oh, trust me, I know. She's far too good for me." Harry grinned at Tom and offered him a washcloth and a bar of soap. Tom got to work while Harry leaned against the door. It was strange, he mused, being married to someone else while you had a perfectly good soulmate right there. Harry loved Lucia, he really did. She was a good wife, strong-willed but loyal to a fault, not afraid to get her hands dirty but also not asking too many questions about Harry's work. Yes, Harry loved her, yet she couldn't compare to Tom, no matter how wonderful a wife she made. That wasn't her fault, that was just their strange circumstances. Harry knew Tom felt similarly about his wife Mia, who was also a fine woman who genuinely loved Tom and their kids.

After Tom was cleaned up and dressed in the too big for him clothes from Harry, they made their way to the kitchen where the kids were just finishing up their dinner.

“I called Mia,” Lucia said as she stood leaning against the counter. “Told her what happened. She said to be careful and she won’t expect you back anytime soon.”

Tom stepped up to Lucia, placed both hands on the side of her head and pressed a kiss to each cheek. “You are a godsend, woman. Tony doesn’t know how lucky he is.”

Lucia rubbed a hand up and down Tom’s arm. “I’m sorry for your loss, Paul.”

Meanwhile, Harry kissed all his kids and finally his wife. The lives they led were violent and could end at pretty much any moment, as the whole nasty situation with Tom’s father just then proved, and once Harry had started his family he’d vowed to always say goodbye to them before leaving, to never miss an opportunity to let them know he loved them.

“Stay safe, both of you,” Lucia said as she stood in the doorway, hand curled around the front door as Harry and Tom walked down the hallway to the stairs.

“Don’t wait up, sweetheart,” Harry called over his shoulder and then followed Tom down the stairs. “I got plenty of guns in the car.”

They almost bumped into Harry’s downstairs neighbour, a veteran of the war who’d lost an arm in the pacific theatre. Both Tom and Harry had gotten out of military service by bribing a few doctors to create a whole fake medical history for them. Harry suddenly had severe asthma and Tom came down with a childhood case of scoliosis and slumbering TB. Not that Harry and Tom minded killing Nazis. They had, in several lives. But this life they were mobsters and they wanted to put their time and effort into that, and being shipped off to end up killed in the war would prematurely put a stop to the plans they had, so they simply skipped the whole affair.

“Where are the Valachi brothers at?” Harry asked as he sat down behind the wheel of his car. Tom ripped open the glove compartment and pulled out a few guns and then felt under the passenger seat and found two more. He handed Harry two of them and placed the rest on his own person.

“Usually, the Sunset Club.” Tom stared straight ahead, keeping one gun in his lap, finger close to the trigger.

“Then let’s go and smoke the fuckers.” Harry turned the key in the ignition and the car roared to life. It was funny, kind of, how Harry used to be such a goody two shoes who wouldn’t ever even consider killing someone, for any reason.

That had changed quickly enough, though. In life number nine, when they’d been samurai in feudal Japan, Harry had killed a few people already before he got his memories back and by then he’d already lived so many lives he didn’t look at death the same way as he’d once did. From there on he’d moved on to monster hunting in life number fourteen, and while the monsters weren’t humans, they were still sentient beings in their own way, and Harry had no problem killing them.

After that there had been instances of killing others during military service, tribal wars and yes, as criminals who whacked each other, eventually.

Death became meaningless in some ways, if you knew you'd just be reincarnated anyway, so why wouldn't you kill other people if you thought you could get away with it?

So far, the life they were living as mobsters was very much like living in a movie. Both Harry and Tom enjoyed the heck out of it, even if it was violent and bloody and you always had to watch over your shoulders for the police and the feds. It was still an interesting life to lead, a welcome distraction from their usual lives in which they got married, had a bunch of kids and tried to find meaningful jobs to pay the bills. Not that they didn't enjoy those lives, because they did, but trying something new every once in a while kept things fresh.

So the idea of gunning down some morons who thought it a good idea to kill Tom's dad didn't bother Harry one bit.

As they turned into the street where the Sunset Club was at, another black car cut them off, forcing Harry to pound on the brakes while driving half up the curb.

"What the fuck!" Harry yelled as Tom pointed his gun at the car through the windshield.

Tom's older brother Vito got out of the car, followed by their cousin Vinnie. Tom lowered his gun and jumped out of the car as well.

"Boss says no," Vito said to Tom, whose whole face tightened in obvious anger.

"Those fuckers killed Pa," Tom said through gritted teeth, waving his gun at the Sunset Club just a couple of yards away. "I was there, Vito."

"I know," Vito said, looking equally as angry as Tom. "But the boss says no. Says we can't afford a war with the Moretti family right now."

"So they just get away with it?" Tom paced in front of the car while Harry got half out of it, keeping one foot on the step while leaning on the opened car door. Harry felt for Tom at that moment, but if the boss said you couldn't whack a guy, you couldn't whack a guy, no matter how much they deserved it. Ignoring a boss' orders was suicide, literally.

"For now. But we won't forget it, Paulie." Vito cleared his throat and reached inside his coat for a pack of smokes. He lit one with a golden Zippo. "I'm taking over as Captain, the Boss already approved it."

Tom nodded while staring at the ground, his whole body trembling with fury he was desperately trying to hold back. "Fine. See you tomorrow." And without looking at anyone, Tom got back into the car.

"Sorry for your loss, Vito," Harry called before getting back into the car as well.

"Thanks, Tony. Look after my brother, will you?" Vito gestured at the stoic figure in Harry's car with his cigarette, trailing smoke through the darkness.

"Sure, I'll take him someplace nice, get him drunk, find some hot broads." Harry had no intention of doing any of those things, but you had to keep up appearances as a mobster.

“That’ll cheer him up,” Vito agreed easily. “I’m going to mom’s, start preparing for pa’s funeral.”

“Give her my condolences. Good luck, Vito.” And with that Harry closed the car door and started the engine.

It wasn’t until they were driving aimlessly for fifteen minutes that Tom finally spoke again.

“How the hell did Vito get the boss to approve him as Captain so soon?” Tom turned in his seat to stare at Harry. “There are at least five other guys older and more experienced who are next in line to become a captain. Dad hasn’t been dead for more than three hours and already Vito is the new Captain?”

“Huh.” Harry looked out the window and slowed the car down for a red traffic light. “You think Vito had something to do with this? And the boss, too?”

“Maybe,” Tom whispered, brow furrowed in some serious thought. “But why?”

As it turned out, the answer to that was women.

Right after the funeral, during the gathering at Tom’s mother’s house, Tom sidled up to Harry. “It’s fucking whores.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about but please don’t spoil my appetite,” Harry mumbled as he loaded his plate with the many dishes available. Tom’s family had many excellent cooks as well. His Aunt Sophia’s chicken parmesan was legendary and Harry made sure he got a generous portion of that.

“Why they whacked him,” Tom whispered urgently in Harry’s ear. Behind them, Lucia and Mia were chattering and thankfully not paying attention to their conversation. “Dad always thought operating brothels was distasteful, even if he couldn’t keep it in his own pants for two minutes. His body wasn’t even buried yet and Vito has already opened three of them with the boss’ backing.”

“So it was business,” Harry said while filling his plate with more lasagne. There was no such things as too much lasagne, as far as he was concerned. “Your dad refused to open new businesses and the boss decided to go with the son so they could make some money together.”

“Sure, it was business,” Tom quietly agreed. “But Vito had our pa killed for money.” Tom glared across the room at Vito, who stood entertaining a few other Captains and their wives with tall tales and many shots of whiskey. “If he thinks he’s getting away with that, he needs to think again.”

“You’ve got to play this smart,” Harry urged him before taking a bite of chicken parmesan. Holy fuck, that was so good. Harry added another portion to his plate, just because he could.

“I can’t believe a Gryffindor is telling me to play something smart,” Tom said with a disdainful little sniff. “Of course, I’m playing it smart, you putz. I’m going along with them

but in the meantime I'm waiting in the wings to take them both out when the time is right."

"See? Smart." Harry grinned at Tom while finally stepping away from all the food, plate overloaded. It was so heavy, Harry had to hold onto it with both hands.

"Are you going to eat all that?" Tom asked him in disbelief. "You're getting fat. No, you have been fat for a few years already, but now you're getting even more fat."

"Stop fat shaming me," Harry said with a mock glare. "You know Italian food is a weakness of mine."

"It's the forties, darling," Tom whispered back with a wicked grin. "Fat shaming hasn't been invented yet, so from now on I'm calling you Fat Tony."

"See if I care," Harry said and took an enormous bite of lasagne.

Queens, New York, 1963

It took them seventeen years of plotting and planning but they did it. Right before Harry's son Frankie married Tom's oldest daughter Harrietta, Tom and Harry executed their plan, taking over both their respective families. They'd both been made Captains a few years prior and since then they'd spent days and weeks and months networking and building businesses with other mobsters across the whole country. Harry got heavily involved with several unions, especially anything to do with construction work, because he who controlled the unions ultimately controlled New York. Harry knew in the coming decades construction would be one of the most, if not the most, lucrative business in the Big Apple and this way Harry was sitting right on top of a goldmine.

Tom in the meantime focussed more on gambling and got involved in the founding of Las Vegas, investing in a few hotels and casinos there that earned him a very nice and semi-legal income. Eventually they made so much money and had so many favours owed to them that they were in a position to take over their families, which they did in one bloody night in early May. Tom killed his boss and his own brother Vito, and Harry went after his own boss, who looked at him in confusion when Harry pointed a gun at him after shooting his three bodyguards through the head in quick succession.

"It's nothing personal," Harry assured the boss, who'd always been good to him. "It's just business. You know how it is." Then he pulled the trigger and from then on Harry was the boss of his own successful mafia family.

Lucia got to pick out a luxurious mansion to live in while Harry spent a small fortune on the wedding of his son to Tom's daughter.

While the young couple waltzed across the dancefloor, staring at each other like the lovesick fools they were, Harry leaned over towards Tom and held up a flute of champagne. Tom held up his own and clinked it against Harry's.

“Here’s to a successful and productive future,” Harry said, which Tom answered with a wide smile.

Later, Harry danced with his new daughter-in-law, who looked radiant in her silk wedding gown, while Mia took Frankie for a spin across the dancefloor. Everyone who was someone in the New York underworld was there to celebrate the wedding, because two families joining together in this way was cause for celebration. Wars between families were always a threat waiting to happen, costing many lives and taking away time and energy that could be spent on making money.

Therefore, since the early 20th century, the New York underworld had been governed by the Five Families in a Commission headed by each of the Families’ bosses. Now it was Harry and Tom’s turn to sit at that particular table and make decision on how the businesses should be run and how territories should be divided.

“You want us to pay fucking taxes?” Ennio Ferro demanded during their first ever meeting with Tom and Harry attending as the new bosses.

Harry sighed. “They got Capone on tax evasion,” he explained for the umpteenth time. “Al Capone was Chicago’s biggest, baddest mob boss and the local police or the feds couldn’t make anything stick on the guy. Capone was a slippery as an eel, got out of every single charge. Until the IRS came along and got him for tax evasion. The guy died in prison, fucking legend that he was.”

“We get what you’re saying,” Ciro Mangano said while waving his cigar around. “But the IRS got to prove we’re making money in the first place if they want to make tax evasion stick.”

“You drive a Rolls Royce, Ciro,” Harry said with an unimpressed look. “You really think the IRS will believe you when you tell them you hardly turn a profit with the family dry cleaning business?”

Mangano shrugged and smiled before puffing on his cigar.

“I ain’t paying the feds a goddamn penny of my hard earned cash,” Ennio Ferro said, crossing his arms while giving Harry an incredibly dirty look.

Vinnie Masseria, the oldest and most experienced boss there finally cleared his throat and at once everyone stopped talking to hear what he had to say. If Capote had been a legend, Vinnie Masseria was a deity, and unofficially he was the capo di tutti i capi, the boss of all bosses. When the man spoke, you listened.

“We understand what you are saying, Tony,” Vinnie said with a thoughtful tilt of his head, a glass of red wine in his hand. “And we thank you for your concern as to what the feds can get us on. But so far, at least for a few decades, the feds haven’t made any moves on our families. At most the local cops get our people on minor charges from time to time and a few soldiers or captains get sent to prison for a few years, but that is part of the game, we all know that.”

Harry nodded, sipping his own wine.

“You both own the local police, yeah?” Vinnie asked.

“Yeah, I got every copper in my area on the payroll,” Harry said.

“So do I,” Tom agreed with a short nod.

“Then there is nothing to worry about for now,” Vinnie said, spreading his arms in a gesture of acceptance. “The feds aren’t moving on us now, and when they might get that idea in the future, we’ll deal with it.”

Harry nodded his agreement and beside him, Tom did the same. For now they would hold their tongues on the subject, but in the future they’d bring it up again. Both Tom and Harry were adamant they weren’t going to fucking prison for tax evasion after they’d spent decades building a successful criminal empire.

The three other bosses were there for the wedding, and everything seemed to be going well until later in the evening a gunshot rung out over the music and people started screaming.

Both Tom and Harry pulled guns out of their tuxedo jackets and rushed towards the commotion near the front doors of the venue.

Joseph, Tom’s oldest son, lay on the floor, white tuxedo jacket slowly colouring red from a gunshot wound to the chest. Tom dropped to the floor at once and held up his son, a young man of just twenty three years old. Joseph’s eyes were wide and full of fear and bloody bubbles erupted from between his pale lips and the doctor in Harry knew it was a shot that hit his lungs and that any help would come to late.

Mia came rushing forward, wailing as she dropped to her knees beside Tom, pressing her face against Joseph’s bloody chest.

“Who did it?” Harry asked, looking around at the shocked guests. He spotted a few of his soldiers stepping back inside and approached them. “Who was it?”

“We didn’t see them, boss,” Marco, one of his most trusted soldiers said. “He sat on the back of a motorcycle and was wearing a helmet and he shot Joseph the moment he stepped in front of that open door.”

“So he was waiting for him,” Harry concluded. Whether it was Joseph personally or any of their kids was anyone’s guess. As Harry closed his arms around a crying Lucia he gazed out across the guests and spotted a smug looking Ennio Ferro taking in the whole scene. Yeah, that fucker arranged to have one of their kids killed, Harry was sure of it, simply because Harry and Tom had dared to suggest they pay taxes to keep them from going to prison for the rest of their lives.

On the floor, Tom and Mia held onto their dead child and suddenly that life didn’t seem like living in a movie much anymore.

“Look at what I found,” Harry told Tom the moment he stepped out of his car on Tom’s long, elaborate driveway. They owned mansions only a couple of minutes apart, but Harry still drove his Bentley since a lifetime of indulging in Italian food and weighing much more than he should had wrecked his knees and even walking short distances was painful now. In the backseat of his car, his three prized pedigree Italian mastiffs took up all the space and sat drooling all over the place. Harry bred and showed them, because even as a mob boss he needed dogs around him, plus they were so intimidating looking that they made for excellent guard dogs in his own home, even if they were mostly lazy, spoiled things that slept for the majority of the time.

“What did you find?” Tom asked, previous black hair completely grey now and sporting his own potbelly, though he wasn’t nearly as corpulent as Harry.

Harry held out a wire with a small microphone attached. “Found it inside my TV. Lucia told me repairmen had stopped by because the TV suddenly acted funny but I didn’t trust that one bit.”

“So the feds are wire-tapping us,” Tom concluded with a nod. “That was to be expected eventually.”

Harry sighed and leaned against his car. “Yeah, no more talking business inside anywhere from now on. We’ll have to talk while walking. Ugh, and my knees are already killing me.”

“Get them replaced,” Tom suggested with a shrug.

“It’s the early seventies. Surgery is still so barbaric,” Harry whined while hobbling after Tom through the garden after releasing his dogs from the car. They hobbled just as much as Harry, lazy things that they were.

“It’s not. You’ll be fine. You just hate hospitals,” Tom said with a smirk and Harry was tempted to stick his tongue out but controlled himself. There were soldiers everywhere around the property as security guards, and Harry had a part to play of intimidating mob boss. It was unbecoming for him to indulge in childish behaviour, no matter how tempting.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll see a doctor.” Of course, Harry had no intention of doing such a thing. He truly did hate hospitals, not to mention going in for double knee surgery made him vulnerable, and as a mob boss he couldn’t afford to be vulnerable for any amount of time.

“They’re going to use the RICO Act to get us,” Tom said as they strolled past his pristine rose beds.

“The who the what now?” Harry asked in utter confusion.

“Don’t you read the fucking papers?” Tom gave Harry a genuinely annoyed look. “The feds are going to use the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act to bring us all down.”

“Yeah, you need to explain that more,” Harry said as he stopped walking to sit down on one of the stone benches around the round marble fountain with a small statue of a naked lady

holding a fish on top. His dogs lay down around them as well, panting and drooling like it was going out of style.

“The RICO Act was signed into law by the President last year,” Tom sat as he slowly lowered himself to the bench beside Harry. “It basically means that if one member of a criminal organization commits a crime, then all members of that organization can be brought up on charges for it.”

Harry’s mouth slowly sank open. “The Commission. They’re going to try to get us through the other three bosses who aren’t nearly as careful as we are. They don’t even fucking pay taxes, even if we’ve been telling them to do so for years.”

Tom and Harry had taken out Ennio Ferro years before for murdering Tom’s son, blaming the hit on a minor mob boss from Las Vegas who proved to be a pain in Tom’s ass with a competing casino. With that mob boss gone, Tom had taken over that casino as well and now owned half the strip. He had a whole bunch of nephews and cousins who managed all those businesses for him, since his son was dead and he had three daughters left who had no interest in the family business. Meanwhile, Harry was extorting New York’s construction scene, since he pretty much owned all New York unions. If anyone wanted to build anything in any part of New York, they’d better pay Harry a nice little sum of money or else the union workers would go on strike and nothing would get built. Such a simple but very profitable business model that really only hurt rich corporations. Harry loved it.

Ennio Ferro’s replacement in The Commission wasn’t much smarter than his predecessor and also refused to simply set up a financial model that laundered part of their money and at least made the suggestion that taxes were paid over most of it. Harry and Tom had an elaborate network of shell businesses and international bank accounts to deal with their money, and on some of it, their public bank accounts, they paid taxes so the feds couldn’t pin them down for tax evasion.

But now with the RICO Act that might very well have all been in vain if they could be charged with the other bosses’ crimes.

“Motherfucker,” Harry said in heartfelt frustration after he realized how screwed they really were. “And Vinnie Masseria is a fucking relic who believes he’s above every fucking law.”

“Yep,” Tom sighed, leaning back and gazing up at the clear blue sky. “That man has been at the top of his family for so long and has gotten away with so much that he genuinely believes himself invincible.”

“No one is invincible,” Harry said with conviction.

“I know.” Tom turned to look at Harry. “We need to call a meeting with The Commission and warn them.”

“Vinnie is probably just going to tell us the feds can’t hurt us when they fucking well can.” Harry gave Tom a contemplative look. “How about we get rid of Vinnie and you become the boss of all bosses.”

“What?” Tom seemed genuinely surprised by that suggestion.

“We blame it on someone else, of course,” Harry said with a careless shrug. “But he needs to go and we need to get the others in line soon or we’ll all go down.”

Sighing, Tom nodded and got to his feet again. “I’ll call a meeting.”

Harry stayed for an hour more as they made plans on how to deal with Vinnie Masseria and then he loaded up his dogs and drove home.

The house was dark but the soldiers guarding his property assured him Lucia was home from her shopping trip. Harry found her sitting in the kitchen, all lights turned off. Harry turned them on and realized she looked as pale as a ghost. There was a cold cup of coffee sitting on the table in front of her.

“Lucia? Sweetheart? What’s wrong?” Harry pulled up a chair and sat down next to her. He gently placed his hand on her arm.

Without looking at him, Lucia said, “I’ve been to the doctor a few times for a lump in my breast.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Harry said, sliding his arm around her shoulders, but she didn’t lean into him like she usually did.

“It’s cancer. And the only way they can treat me is by cutting off both my breasts.” Lucia bent her head while her shoulders shook with quiet sobs.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart.” Harry pulled her into a tight hug, his heart aching for what he knew Lucia must be going through. Harry himself had once had a double mastectomy in one life when he’d been diagnosed with breast cancer. And it was only 1971. There wasn’t much else on offer when it came to treating that kind of cancer. Radiation and chemo therapy were still in their infancy. “We’ll get you the best doctors, I promise. And Frankie, Paulie and Luca know the business, they can take over for me for a while.”

“I’m so scared,” Lucia whispered against his chest.

“I know.” And Harry did know. He’d been through cancer diagnoses so many times before, both as patient and as bystander. “We’ll get through this, sweetheart, you’ll see.”

Queens, New York, 1972.

Harry lost his wife the next year. Even with surgery the doctors hadn’t been able to prevent the cancer spreading until there was nothing more they could do for her. Lucia was 52 years old when she died, the same age as Harry was. Their fourth grandchild had just been born and their daughter was getting married the next year.

Frankie, Paulie and Luca had taken over more and more of the business as Harry had tried to be there as much as he could for Lucia, especially in her final weeks and days.

Still, his daughter Luna was supremely unhappy with him and let him know right after the funeral as they gathered in Harry's mansion.

"You were never there for her," Luna spat at him, face contorted in anger. "Or any of us."

Harry was genuinely taken aback by her accusations. "What? I was always there when you were little."

"Maybe when Frankie was little, but you ignored the rest of us. Always running off with Big Paul, taking care of your businesses but not your family."

"That's not fair," Harry said, heart pounding in his chests. He'd honestly thought he'd been a pretty good father to his kids and he had made an effort to spend time at home but being a mob boss was busy work.

"For fuck's sake, Dad," Luna said with vicious smile. "Mom spent years fucking her driver and you never even noticed."

"That's enough," Frankie said, quickly grabbing Luna's arm and dragging her away.

"She's just upset," Luca offered with a small, unsure smile. "She's just lashing out."

"Is it true, though?" Harry asked his two sons who were still in the room with him. "Did Lucia...did she really..."

Paulie sighed and shook his head but the look he gave Harry made it clear that it was true, that his wife had an affair right under his nose and Harry had been too busy to even notice.

"Fucking hell," Harry lowered his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. His knees were killing him and he stumbled towards the dining table and pulled out a chair so he could sit.

"I got rid of the driver when I found out," Paulie offered while patting Harry on his shoulder. "He's gone and not coming back."

"Good." Harry wanted to be glad that bastard was dead but honestly, he was in too much shock to really care.

Tom came walking into the room, took one look at Harry and left again, only to return with two glasses of whiskey. "Leave us," Tom told Paulie and Luca and they obeyed after Harry waved them off.

"Lucia was cheating on me," Harry mumbled as he accepted the drink Tom offered him. "I can't believe I never noticed."

"You've been spending more and more time running your business over the last decade or two," Tom said, pulling out a chair for himself. "She probably felt lonely."

"I haven't been a very good husband. Or father," Harry concluded as he wiped a hand across his eyes before taking a fortifying gulp of whiskey.

“You did your best. Our line of work isn’t ideal for normal family lives,” Tom offered, leaning back in his chair, one arm hooked over the backrest. “One of Mia’s favourite hobbies is shouting any grievances she has with me right in my face. And she has plenty.”

Harry snorted and released a watery chuckle.

“She loved you, Harry,” Tom whispered as he leaned a little closer. “And I don’t think she ever stopped loving you, even if she looked for affection and intimacy elsewhere.”

“I loved her, too. And I’m going to miss her, I really am.” Harry wiped a hand across his eyes again and finished his whiskey.

“I know,” Tom said, and he did know and that made Harry feel better, that he wasn’t alone in this feeling of grief, that Tom was feeling similar things as Harry was. “Now, are you ready to stage another coup and get rid of Vinnie?”

“Hell yeah,” Harry said and got up from his chair, his knees protesting vehemently, but Harry ignored the pain. They had business to attend.

Queens, New York, 1976.

As it turned out, their efforts to dispose of Vinnie Masseria and naming Tom the new boss of all bosses were too little, too late.

The feds arrested the entire Commission, all five bosses, in June of 1976. Harry didn’t fight it, just went with it, knowing he had the best criminal defence lawyers on retainer and that they’d get him out on bail as soon as possible.

The judge set bail for one million dollars, but that wasn’t a problem for Harry. Or for Tom. They celebrated their release together with dinner at their favourite restaurant, a place called Camparia that served amazing lobster. They finished two bottles of wine between them and talked about everything and nothing until the place was ready to close.

Harry’s driver got him home and Harry greeted his mastiffs with lots of hugs and drunken kisses and then managed to get undressed for the most part before crawling into his big, empty bed. Sometimes he really wished he and Tom could just be together, just share a bed for one night. It wasn’t even about sex, though Harry enjoyed having sex with Tom plenty. It was about love, plain and simple.

But alas. As mob bosses, there were soldiers around them day and night as protection, so there were eyes on them at all times, and they couldn’t indulge in any of the intimacy they both craved. No one in their families would accept a couple of gay mob bosses. It would be suicide, plain and simple.

The phone ringing woke Harry up a couple of hours later.

“Dad?” Frankie asked, sounding disturbingly upset. “Dad? Paul’s dead. Big Paul, not our Paulie.”

Harry's entire body stiffened while a shiver passed across his back as if someone had doused him in ice-water. Tom was dead. "How? Who did it?"

"He was shot at his mansion. A bunch of shooters broke in, overwhelmed the soldiers and gunned everyone down," Frankie said in a quiet voice. Harry knew he must be hurting, too. Tom had been part of the family for as long as Frankie could remember, was even Frankie's godfather.

"Find out who did it, Frankie. Find out so I can skin the fucker alive." Harry slammed down the phone and buried his face in his hand, sobbing while his shoulders shook. Yes, he would see Tom again, he knew that, but that didn't take away the very real grief that he felt. Their life together, such as it was, had come to an end, and that hurt. That really, really hurt.

Not to mention that whoever did this, whoever murdered Tom, was going to pay. Harry would make sure of it, even if it was the last thing he did in this life.

Frankie called him two days later, while Harry was wallowing in grief and whiskey while lazing on his couch surrounded by snoring mastiffs.

"It was Michael Fucci," Frankie said, not bothering with any greeting.

"One of Paul's Captains?" Harry asked, sobering at once as he sat up in shock. "One of Paul's own Captains whacked him and thought he could get away with it?"

"Yeah," Frankie sighed. "My best guess is that he got worried Paul would cut a deal with the feds to save his own skin while handing them all his captains and soldiers to prosecute."

"Paul would never," Harry said, voice tight in anger. Tom was many things, but he wasn't a fucking traitor to his own people.

"I know," Frankie quickly assured him. "I know he wouldn't have. Michael owns a couple of brothels in Brooklyn. He's there most nights."

"Then I'll be paying him a visit tonight," Harry said and hung up the phone. Time to take a shower and clean his guns.

If Harry thought he'd be able to take off as a lone wolf and enact his vengeance, he was sorely mistaken. All three of his sons showed up just before dinner, bringing Chinese takeout with them.

"We're not letting you do this alone, Dad," Luca said while Paulie set the table and Frankie got beers from the fridge.

"It's going to be dangerous," Harry pointed out while Luca filled Harry's plate with fried rice and sweet and sour pork, his favourites.

"Exactly," Frankie said while he rolled his eyes. "That's why we're coming."

"No, listen," Harry told his sons, his children. He'd made up with Luna a month after Lucia's funeral and he'd walked her down the isle to the altar and he'd welcomed her first child into

the family, but he'd always had a tighter bond with his sons, since they were active in the family business. "I'm an old man. I got shitty knees, I'm diabetic and my blood-pressure is sky-high." Harry really had been indulging himself a little too much in all the amazing Italian food around him over many years. "I've had a good life. If something happens to me, so be it. But you've got things to live for."

"So do you," Frankie said, gesturing at the pictures on the wall of Harry's family. Children and grandchildren.

"Yeah, fine, you can come," Harry finally agreed, realizing his kids wouldn't let him go off alone and appreciating their loyalty. He'd raised some fine sons, even if he hadn't been the best dad that time around. "Just stay behind me." That earned him a few snorts and eyerolls, but no objections, so Harry counted that as a win.

Paulie had found out through some of his contacts where Michael Fucci would be that night and they took off just after nine, weapons loaded and at the ready. Harry took a double dose of painkillers so he wouldn't buckle half-way through the hit from his knees killing him, metaphorically speaking.

Harry put two bullets into the heads of the soldiers guarding the door, having no patience for anything other than avenging Tom. They met another couple of soldiers, who Harry dispatched himself. Finally they found Michael, who'd been watching their progression through his brothel on a row of security cameras and who was ready with a Smith and Wesson.

He got one shot off that hit Harry right in the gut, and even Harry's generous belly didn't protect his vital organs from the bullet. But Harry ignored the burning, screaming pain and shot Michael in the gut in return. A shot that would be fatal, but not immediately. He'd suffer for at least ten minutes while he bled out on the inside.

"It was nothing personal," Michael said as he lay on the floor, looking up at Harry with glassy eyes. "Just business."

"Well, this is personal," Harry said, and put another bullet into Michael's gut just to shut him up. And then Harry's knees buckled and hit the floor and his sons were there to sit him up against the wall.

"Dad," Luca said, tears shimmering in his eyes. "We'll call an ambulance."

"No," Harry said. He knew the wound was fatal, and he didn't mind dying, not really. He'd miss his kids and grandkids, but he'd see Tom again, so it was all right. "I'm so proud of you, boys," Harry said, looking from one son to the next. "And Luna, too. Tell her that."

"We will," Paulie promised him with a tremulous smile. "We'll tell her."

"And look after my dogs," Harry managed to say before his throat closed up, the pain in his belly rising up to his chest.

"Of course," Luca whispered, fingers clasped around Harry's shoulder.

And that is how Harry died, surrounded by his sons after killing the scumbag who'd killed Tom. As his vision blackened out while Harry was frantically staring at his sons, committing their features to his memories as best he could, Harry could only hope that their next life was a quieter one.

But that is another life, and another story.

Life # 50: That time Harry and Tom were sorcerers in Kamar Taj (with surprise guest stars!)

Chapter Summary

Life # 50: That time Harry and Tom were sorcerers in Kamar Taj (with surprise guest stars!)

Chapter Notes

One of my favourite of Harry and Tom's lives, with some fun guest stars!

I did make myself cry, writing the end to this, so make of that what you will.

Thanks for reading! I hope you'll enjoy it. Let me know what you think.

Kamar Taj, Kathmandu, 1193 A.D.

They met when Harry was eighteen and Tom seventeen.

“You’re a wizard, Harry,” Tom said with the biggest grin on her face.

Harry snorted before she could stop herself, and then she rolled her eyes. “Nope. Sorcerer, babe. And so are you.”

“Student sorcerer,” Tom said, glancing curiously around the large main room of the magical temple they found themselves in. “I only just got here.”

“I’ve been here for almost five years now. Master Azad found me as an orphan living on the streets of Bhaktapur not that far from here. I’m officially an apprentice now.” Harry gestured at Tom to follow her as she walked towards the dormitories. “I’m Hanit, by the way.”

“I’m Tashi from Lhasa, only recently orphaned. My mother, before passing away just a few months ago, had arranged a marriage for me with some older man I don’t particularly like, but thankfully Master Azad offered me an alternative. Magical training instead of an arranged marriage sounded like quite a good deal to me.” Tom followed Harry into a small, private room with stone walls and a narrow, glassless window with only a wooden hatch to cover it .
“I thought we were sleeping in a dormitory?”

“New students, yes,” Harry said, gesturing to the thin mattress on a simple, low wooden frame. “But apprentices get their own rooms, and a real yak-hair mattress instead of those horrible sacks filled with moss and ferns.”

“The hight of luxury,” Tom agreed with a solemn nod.

“So, want to share?” Harry gave Tom a saucy wink while flipping her long, black hair over her shoulder.

Tom stepped a little closer to Harry, looking down at her with a crooked smile. “You’re so small. What are you, three feet?”

“What? No! I’m probably four foot nine, maybe even ten.” Harry crossed her arms and glared up at Tom, who couldn’t be more than five foot four but still towered over Harry. “And you have to be nice to me if you’re sharing my room or else you can go sleep on the ferns, buddy.”

“I’ll be good,” Tom whispered, lowering her head and pressing a soft kiss to Harry’s lips. Tom was beautiful, with long, black hair tied up in a wild bun and warm, brown eyes, and skin bronzed by the sun. Harry sagged against Tom as she deepened the kiss and before long they were having a really good snog, the kind that made Harry’s whole body tingle while things started throbbing and tightening between her legs.

“Fuck, now I’m horny,” Harry whispered against Tom’s grinning mouth. “And we have first meal soon.”

As if on que a bell rang across the whole temple.

“Later,” Tom mumbled against Harry’s lips, giving her one last kiss before pulling away. “But I am quite hungry so breakfast would be good.”

Shaking her head, Harry grabbed Tom’s hand and pulled her along to the mess hall. They could be patient with any intimate relationship. Their previous life they’d been happily married for over fifty years with two kids and a bunch of grandkids. Tom had been a man, a small town doctor in a coastal town in Croatia, and Harry had been a woman and after the kids were old enough to go to school full time, Harry had gotten involved in local politics, at first to save the library, but later because she enjoyed it. Harry had never had ambitions to do politics on a large, national scale, like Tom sometimes had, but in that life Harry had made it to mayor and enjoyed doing that job for many years.

That was, until Yellowstone blew and the whole world faced a famine, but that was a story for another time.

“We usually have dal in the mornings,” Harry said, guiding Tom towards the table holding several large steaming pots. The food in that era and location was simple but warm, filling and nourishing. Lots of lentil soups known as dal served over rice, barley or millet, with spicy pickles on the side, for breakfast and lunch. And for dinner they usually had some form of tarkari, a vegetable curry also served with whatever kind of grain was available. Usually

topped with a soft-boiled egg, and once or twice a week served with a spoonful of meat, usually stewed goat, sheep or yak.

They were quite high up in the Himalayas and the climate was cold and the growing season short, so they had to make do with whatever they managed to grow with only buying small amounts of rice that was brought to the region on the backs of yaks and was therefore quite expensive. All students were expected to work the fields and tend the animals, sheep and goats and yaks and a whole flock of chickens that belonged to the temple, situated in various locations around the area, and that provided most of their food. Harry always enjoyed farm work and knew Tom wouldn't mind doing it, either.

They'd lived in ancient times often enough at that point to know that work like that was necessary, because you couldn't just pop into a supermarket or McDonalds for a quick meal. To survive, you had to make sure you grew your own food, simple as that.

"It smells good," Tom commented as they both filled bowls with barley and dal.

"The food here is great," Harry agreed, adding some pickles before offering the serving spoon to Tom. "I mean, most anything tastes good after you've had to beg for food on the street, but they genuinely have some good cooks here."

"Yes," Tom agreed, following after Harry to find a spot to sit at the many long tables lined with benches. "I'm happy to at least have three full meals a day again."

The Ancient One, their fearless leader, looked up from her spot a few tables over and her eyes widened significantly as she looked at Harry and Tom.

Harry wouldn't be surprised if she somehow knew something had changed about her with Tom's arrival. The Ancient One always seemed to know everything. She was without a doubt the most omniscient person Harry had ever met, and Harry was sure that had something to do with the ugly necklace she always wore, known as the Eye of Agamotto. Harry had no clue what it did, but she was determined to find out.

During their meal, Harry chattered away, explaining the rules of Kamar Taj to Tom and talking about what to expect about her upcoming magical training.

Just as they were done, a figure stopped behind them, looming over them. "Please follow me," the Ancient One said, and turned on her heels.

Harry and Tom hurried after her, dropping their used bowls and spoons off at the designated table to be washed. The Ancient One led them to the meditation room, which was empty while most people were still at breakfast.

"You have...grown, Hanit," the Ancient One said while giving Harry a most intense look, her blue eyes blazing.

"She wishes," Tom muttered and then quickly looked down at her feet when the Ancient One glanced at her.

“I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I’m Tashi from Lhasa,” Tom said, meeting the Ancient One’s gaze with a polite smile. “Master Azad brought me here just this morning.”

The Ancient One folded her hands in front of her, head tilted as she looked from Harry to Tom and back. “You are, and yet you are so much more.”

“Yes, fine,” Harry said, deciding there and then to share the truth with the Ancient One. They usually didn’t tell anyone about their weird, endless cycle of reincarnation because most people wouldn’t believe them, think them insane, or if they did believe them they wouldn’t be able to do anything with that information except treat Harry and Tom like outcasts. Over their lives so far there had only been very few exceptions to that rule.

But the Ancient One had earned her name and she was a kind and fair leader, as far as Harry knew. And she was their best bet to having answers as to what was happening to them and why. If anyone they’d ever met across the multiverse knew, it would be her.

“My first name is Harry, and this is Tom, and we are stuck in a unending cycle of reincarnation,” Harry explained, while Tom whipped her head around to stare at Harry in surprise but still keeping silent. After all that time, Tom trusted Harry completely, and thus trusted her judgment when it came to who to tell the truth to. “When we look in each other’s eyes we regain our memories from our previous lives. This is life number 50.”

“And you have no idea why this is happening?” the Ancient One asked softly, eyes narrowing just a smidge.

“Not really. In our first lives we were wizards, we had magic different than the one we have here. We believe we may have inadvertently gathered a few magical artifacts that caused this, but we don’t know anything for certain.” Harry decided not to mention the horcruxes for now. What Tom had done to her own soul once upon a time was such a large taboo that it would change people’s perception of her, and Harry preferred they get to know her first without any prejudice so they could form their own opinion.

“I have honestly never heard of such a thing,” the Ancient One said after a few moments of deep thought. “I will spend some time in the library to see what I can discover there.” And with a short nod, the Ancient One turned around and left.

“Won’t she mind if we’re shacking up?” Tom asked while Harry grabbed her hand again to take her sightseeing across the temple. “This era isn’t exactly kind to people in same-sex relationships.”

“Outside these walls, yeah, people won’t accept us,” Harry agreed. “But here, the sorcerers don’t care. We have several people in relationships with someone of their own gender.”

“Good.” Tom’s grin turned into an absolutely filthy little smile. “Because I’m a girl again and I can’t wait to share a few multiple orgasm with my soulmate.”

Harry cracked up and laughed all the way to the courtyard.

And later that night, both Tom and Harry made good on their intentions with their fingers and their lips and their tongues. And afterwards, as they lay panting on the luxurious yak-hair mattress, their sweaty bodies covered with a scratchy wool blanket, Harry basked in the simple happiness she felt.

This was going to be an interesting life, she just knew it.

Baghdad, Persia, 1203 A.D.

“These are so amazing,” Harry said, carefully cradling the sticky dates she’d bought in a clean handkerchief against her chest. “So sweet.” Harry popped one in her mouth, chewing slowly while closing her eyes in obvious pleasure.

Tom reached over to snatch a date and stuck it in her own mouth before Harry could object. “They are good.”

Harry mock-glared at her but didn’t mind sharing her well-earned treat. They were in Baghdad to find a new student, someone the Ancient One had seen in some way would make an excellent sorcerer but who was currently twelve-years-old and living as a street rat. Some kid named Hassan.

Over the last decade Harry and Tom had applied themselves to their magical studies with passion and discipline, rising to the ranks of Masters in record time. It helped, of course, that they already were familiar with magic in many forms in other worlds. The magic they learned now wasn’t all that different at its roots, just the spells and rituals used to create and control the magic were new and had to be memorized.

Unfortunately, the Ancient One hadn’t been able to find much of anything explaining their endless cycle of reincarnation. Harry could tell it genuinely baffled her, that after the very long time she’d been alive, she now encountered a problem she didn’t have an answer for. The Ancient One had become a friend and confidant to them both, and they’d spent many hours while drinking many cups of tea, telling her about their previous lives, which the Ancient One was always happy and curious to hear about.

And once Harry and Tom became Masters and Master Azad was getting on in his age and wished to spend more time with his partner, Master Xing, the Ancient One decided Harry and Tom were to become the new recruiters. Harry and Tom didn’t mind one bit, as they loved travelling and holy cow, being able to open portals to anywhere in the world was the best magical invention, ever, according to both Harry and Tom. It was far more comfortable and safe than apparition or even portkeys.

It had been one of Harry and Tom’s most important missions, to learn how to make sling rings from scratch, because it would undoubtedly come in handy in future lives. Of course, magic was different in every world, and the specific magic used with a sling ring to open portals throughout the world and even the multiverse wouldn’t be found in just any new world. But Harry was convinced that they would encounter similar worlds again sometime, so it was excellent knowledge to have.

Now they found themselves on the hunt for a street kid in the bustling city of Baghdad. Harry loved the Himalayas and could spend hours wandering around the area surrounding Kamar Taj, just taking in the rocky peaks, the deep valleys and the enormous mountains, but travelling to exotic places also had its charms.

“It’s just like in Aladdin,” Harry commented after they finished the dates between them. She gestured at the dusty streets around them, the tan, stone buildings, the little market stalls selling breads and spices and dried fruits. “Riffraff, street rat, scoundrel, take that!” she sang quietly.

“Yep,” Tom agreed while wrinkling her nose. “Too bad Disney never managed to get across the stink of an era before personal hygiene was invented. We might have been a bit more prepared for it if they had.”

Harry burst out in laughter, almost doubling over and bumping against the person in front of her. They were lucky that the Ancient One demanded people keep clean in Kamar Taj, and everyone was expected to wash daily with ice cold water straight from various mountain springs and to take weekly baths, with warm water they had to share with several others. Everywhere else in the world they weren’t so lucky and they had to put up with body odour. Lots and lots of body odour. Not to mention the wonderful smells of human and animal shit and piss everywhere.

You got used to it, for the most part. It’s just that Harry and Tom knew what it could be like once the whole world wizened up to washing regularly and once deodorant and cheap perfumes were invented, and sometimes, they really missed those times when surrounded by hundreds of smelly people.

The tall man Harry had bumped into turned around to snarl at her, raising his meaty fist.

Harry quickly cast a small spell, that world’s equivalent to a confundus charm, and the angry man blinked in confusion, face losing the obvious signs of rage while he turned around and went on his way.

“Yes, just like Aladdin,” Tom said while she glanced at Harry. “Including you pissing of what might very well have been a palace guard.”

Harry laughed and bumped her elbow against Tom’s side before darting off to look at more dried fruit. They got so little of that in Kamar Taj, and Harry loved their sweetness. She was determined to indulge in some dried apricots next. Tom stepped up beside her and eyed the dried figs with interest.

“You did magic,” a new voice with a strange accent sounded from behind them.

Harry and Tom turned around and looked up. And up. And up some more. Whoever the guy was, he was tall as shit. Pale, with slicked back black hair and sporting an interesting black and green leather outfit.

“You’re right,” Harry said, intrigued by this stranger who was clearly out of place in a Baghdad market. “I’m Harry, and this is Tom. Might we know your name?” They had started

using their own names years ago and everyone at Kamar Taj addressed them as such after it came out they were reincarnated and that had been their original names. It was refreshing.

The man in front of them grinned down at them, showing far too many teeth and reminding Harry of a shark about to eat you. “I am Prince Loki Odinson of Asgard.”

Harry snorted. “Sure. And I’m the Queen of England.”

“Ah,” Loki said, face lighting up. “You are royalty yourself, that will help matters greatly. Though I admit I am not familiar with your kingdom.”

Tom lowered her head and pinched the bridge of her nose while her shoulders shook with quiet laughter, all while Harry gaped up at this self-professed Loki of Asgard.

“I was told the mortals here still worship myself and my people,” Loki continued with a self-satisfied smirk. “I wished to see this for myself.”

“Yeah, you’re in the wrong place for that, buddy,” Harry said after a few moments of quiet disbelief. “You need to go north for that. Scandinavia. Or however it’s called right now, I can never keep ancient names straight, there’s so many.”

Loki blinked a few times before visibly squaring his shoulders. “Then you can show me this place, Queen Harry.”

“No can do,” Harry said with a fake smile of regret. What a poser this guy was. “I’ve got work here. But just head north, you’ll get there eventually.” Tom poked Harry in the side a few times and Harry turned to glare at her. “What?”

Tom leaned closer and whispered in Harry’s ear, in ancient Nepalese, the language they spoke in Kamar Taj, “He’s speaking modern English with us. How the fuck is that possible?”

Harry slowly closed her mouth after it fell open in shock for a moment. She and Tom did always speak in modern English together, especially while travelling, because that kept their conversations nice and private. But this clown somehow not only understood modern English before it was even invented, he also spoke it fluently.

Was he a time traveller?

“How do you speak English?” Harry decided to just ask him, since her mind only came up with the most absurd scenarios to explain that little unexpected fact.

“I do not speak your language,” Loki assured them with a quick smile, though his tone suggested he now doubted their intelligence for asking something that stupid. “I am of Asgard. We have Allspeak.”

Tom narrowed her eyes as she gazed up at Loki. “Allspeak allows you to understand and speak all languages?”

Loki nodded. “In essence, yes.”

“Convenient,” Harry muttered to herself, wondering if that was something they could get for themselves as well since they travelled so much to such far off places while recruiting new students.

“I have answered your questions, now you might answer one of mine,” Loki said in a sickly sweet tone, bending down a little to look them in the eye. “How is it you know magic? I was told it had died out in Midgard ages ago.”

“You were told wrong,” Tom replied with a simple shrug. “Our Order of sorcerers has been around since time immemorial.”

“That is what you call yourself. Sorcerers.” Loki narrowed his eyes and looked them over a time or two. “Very well, sorcerers. You shall be my guides on Midgard henceforth.”

“No, we won’t,” Harry said, getting a little fed up with this guy, whoever he was. Harry very much doubted he was Loki the God of Mischief from the mythical realm of Asgard. She wasn’t that gullible, thank you very much.

Loki’s stance changed in such a way both Harry and Tom were instantly wary of what he would do next. He looked like a warrior about to strike the first blow. “I am a Prince of Asgard. My father rules your realm, you mortals are here to serve us, and you shall obey me!”

“That’s news to us,” Harry said with a charming little smile while the Cloak of Levitation perked up around her shoulders.

As part of becoming Masters, both Harry and Tom had received magical artifacts. Tom had bonded very strongly with the Blade of Byzantium, a small, unassuming knife that could instantly transform into any size or shape its Master required. Tom was absolutely lethal with that thing, having learned to change its shape mid fight to throw off her enemies, morphing it from a tiny pocketknife into a four foot longsword mid swing.

And Harry got stuck with a very affectionate piece of clothing. The Cloak of Levitation insisted on being Harry’s, even if Harry really was too short for it and the cloak all but dragged along the ground when Harry wore it. Levitation was all well and good and lots of fun, but Harry did regularly eye Tom’s very cool blade with no small amount of envy.

Several things happened at once. Loki summoned two wicked blades into his hands, from where Harry had no clue. The Cloak around Harry’s shoulders took exception to that and launched itself towards Loki, wrapping firmly around his whole head and dragging him back. Harry created a few magical ropes, throwing them to wrap around Loki’s wrists and ankles. And Tom put on his sling ring at once and opened a portal to the mirror dimension that he made to swallow all three of them. That way no innocent bystanders would get hurt.

Loki shimmered in green magic, turning Harry’s magical ropes to dust. He reached up with both hands, flinging the cloak to the side, and all of a sudden there were eight of him.

“What the fuck,” Harry said, looking around at all the grinning Lokis. “Cute trick.” They were illusions, obviously, and illusions could be easily broken. Still, the magic was

impressive.

Harry conjured a metal cannonball, heated it up until it was bright orange, and sent it flying around in a circle, so it passed through every single fake Loki until it would inevitably hit the real one. Except the real one chickened out at the last moment, jumping out of reach of the cannonball, the rest of the illusions fading away.

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” Harry said with a taunting grin. She was enjoying the fight. She had no intention of permanently injuring or killing Loki, but she felt he needed to learn an urgent lesson in humility.

“Do you need help, darling?” Tom called, as she stood to the side, arms crossed, obviously enjoying the show.

“Don’t be silly,” Harry said with sweet smile, briefly glancing at her soulmate. The Cloak settled around her shoulders again and they rose into the air. “One upstart, wannabe prince is no match for me.”

“Upstart wannabe prince?” Loki demanded, daggers falling into his hand again. What a one-trick pony.

Harry rubbed her hands and really let loose, all while hovering quietly above a fuming Loki. She liquified the sandy ground beneath Loki’s feet, turning it into quicksand, animated the empty merchant stalls around them to attack Loki, and summoned five wild boars, three African buffalos and a hippopotamus to stampede towards the frantically cursing Loki. No one ever expected a hippopotamus to suddenly attack them out of the blue, and those fuckers were fast, strong and had mouths that could snap a grown man in half.

Loki managed to magic all of Harry’s attacks away, hippopotamus included, but only just and afterwards, Loki lay on the ground, panting and covered in mud.

Tom leisurely opened the portal back up to their home dimension. “There’s the door, upstart wannabe prince.”

Loki looked like he wanted to do horrible things to them both, but the moment a still hovering Harry raised her hands again to perform more magic, Loki quickly got to his feet and ran through the portal, fleeing with his metaphorical tail between his legs.

“That was fucking hot,” Tom said as Harry slowly descended until she stood before her.

Harry beamed at Tom. “Thanks, babe. Glad you enjoyed that. I sure did.”

Tom briefly bit her lip. “I’m just wondering if we didn’t just make a mistake.”

“A mistake, how?” Harry asked, utterly confused.

“What if that actually was Loki, God of Mischief,” Tom said carefully, ignoring Harry’s disbelieving scoff. “An actual god might have answers for us, concerning our predicament.”

Sighing, Harry waved towards the glowing portal. "It hardly matters now, since he's gone, and I doubt we'll ever see him again."

"I suppose." Tom shuffled a little closer to Harry, cupped the back of her head and leaned down to kiss her. "You looked so fucking amazing, kicking his ass."

Harry immediately wrapped her arms around Tom's body, pressing close and answering the kiss with lots of tongue. Blindly, Tom closed the portal behind them for the time being, giving them some much needed privacy in the mirror dimensions.

Hassan the street rat could wait for an hour while Tom showed Harry in detail just how hot and bothered Harry's performance had left her.

Kamar Taj, Kathmandu, 1206 A.D.

It took Loki three years to track them down and then he appeared at Kamar Taj one day out of the blue, acting like nothing had happened and they were the best of friends.

Harry wasn't impressed. Tom was mostly amused.

"Friends," Loki said with a charming grin and a little bow as Harry and Tom approached him in the entrance hall of the temple. "I am glad to see you again."

"What do you want?" Harry crossed her arms and looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

"I have come to propose an exchange of knowledge," Loki said, voice dripping with sincerity. "Your display of magic impressed me." This was said in a tone of slight disbelief, as if Loki even after three years still couldn't quite believe a mere mortal had bested him. "And you seemed interested in some of my talents, so perhaps we can come to an arrangement."

"Are you truly Loki, the God of Mischief?" Tom asked. Over the years, neither Harry nor Tom had ever reached a conclusion about that, even when they'd come up with plenty of arguments for and against that conclusion.

Loki straightened himself, overly friendly expression evening out. "I am."

"Prove it," Harry said at once. "Take us to Asgard." That was one way to convince her, Harry decided.

"Ah." Loki looked the picture of regret. "The Allfather doesn't allow mortals into the realm, nor does he know of my excursions to Midgard."

"Figures," Tom muttered.

"But I can take you to any of the other realms, if that might convince you?"

Harry and Tom briefly shared a look. “Isn’t there some world with elves and stuff? Show us the elves, and we’ll believe you,” Harry said, desperately trying to remember all she knew of Norse mythology. This was the first time in all their lives so far that they came face to face with an actual Norse deity, after all. She’d never needed that knowledge before.

“You mean Alfheim?” Loki looked entirely unconcerned by Harry’s request. “I can take you there easily enough. We’ll walk across Yggdrasil.”

Boy, that was tempting, but Harry and Tom weren’t born yesterday. It could very well be a trap from a vengeful Loki determined to get back at them for his humiliation at their hands years ago.

Loki must have seen that doubt on their faces. “I swear to you I mean you no harm,” Loki said, holding up a hand that shimmered with green magic, sealing that vow.

“Well, how can we refuse?” Harry said, sharing an excited look with Tom at the idea of visiting another planet of sorts. Another realm, at least.

Walking across Yggdrasil felt like a weird combination of apparition and walking through a very long portal. Whatever it was, it was very impressive magic and Harry’s opinion of Loki and his magical talents went up quite a few notches. Moments later, they stood on Alfheim.

Harry shared a huge smile with Tom as they walked from the low hill they’d arrived on toward the nearby town filled with white, stone buildings. The countryside was green, with a bright sun and two moons in the sky, convincing Harry that they were indeed in a different world. Huge trees lined the cobbled road and occasionally elves passed them on foot or horseback, and once a delicate white carriage pulled by four white horses. Harry guessed that must be the local nobility. The elves were tall, very human-like, but with slightly pointy ears and shimmering, silver eyes and very pale skin. They barely took any notice of Loki, but both Harry and Tom got a few curious looks. Whether that was because of their Asian features or their relative short statures or something else entirely, Harry hadn’t a clue.

Meanwhile, Loki acted as tour guide and rattled off some of Alfheim’s long history and most notable inhabitants.

There was a small market in the town square and Loki let them have all the time they wanted to inspect the many wonderful wares for sale.

Harry found the softest blanket ever, the edges embroidered with many colourful symbols that reminded Harry of runes, but none that she recognized. “How much for this?” Harry asked, before even realizing she didn’t have much money on her, and the few copper coins in her money bag were probably worthless here. Regretfully, Harry stroked a hand across the blanket and prepared to move on.

“Prince Loki,” the merchant behind the stall said in surprise and with a small bow.

“They know you here?” Tom asked softly, while Harry was still slowly falling in love with a blanket of all things.

“I have spent quite a few years here studying magic,” Loki said in a simple explanation. Then he turned towards the merchant. “These are my friends Harry and Tom. They are visiting from the realm of Midgard.”

“Midgard? Truly? I do not think we’ve ever had visitors from there before.” The merchant noticed Harry’s doe eyes at the blanket and smiled at her. “If you give me a song of your realm, that blanket is yours.”

“A song?” Harry asked, dubiously.

“You do have the better singing voice this life,” Tom whispered to her.

“All right.” Harry cleared her throat. She’s been a performing artist more than once, so performing in public wasn’t that much of a deal. She was just a little rusty. After giving it some thought, Harry sang ‘These are the days of our lives’ from Queen, which always reminded Harry of her and Tom’s situation somehow. Tom sang along with the chorus while giving Harry a frankly sappy smile.

The merchant must also possess Allspeak, because he smiled softly as Harry sang. A small crowd formed around them as word spread Harry and Tom came from Midgard, which seemed like a true novelty to the elves.

“Bravo,” the merchant said once Harry was done. “Thank you for your gift. Now please accept mine.” And with steady hands the merchant gave Harry the blanket, which Harry accepted with a surprisingly shy smile.

“Thank you. This is the most beautiful blanket I’ve ever seen,” Harry said sincerely, holding the folded blanket against her chest. “We will cherish it.”

“I am beyond honoured my wares will make it all the way to Midgard.”

Elves all around them gathered closer to take a look at their small Midgardian guests, and the Cloak around Harry’s shoulders got a little flustered at all the sudden attention and folded Harry up tighter and tighter until Harry told it to knock it off.

A nearby restaurant owner insisted Prince Loki and his two Midgardian friends come dine in his establishment and they enjoyed a hearty meal of roasted meats and vegetables, served with a wine so sweet and fresh, Harry loudly exclaimed it the best drink she’d ever tasted, which earned her a full bottle to take home with them to Midgard.

“Thank you,” Harry said to Loki when the day came to an end and they made their way back to the hill outside the town, to walk Yggdrasil back to earth. “This was amazing.”

“You believe me now?” Loki said with a knowing little smirk. “Who I am?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry said, suddenly a little embarrassed yet equally a little starstruck. This was Loki, God of Mischief! “You were always my favourite of all the Norse gods.”

“Then can we come to an arrangement?” Loki asked expectantly.

“We’ll show you ours if you show us yours,” Tom said with a wink and a devious smile.

Loki laughed. “I do believe this is the start of a beautiful friendship.”

And it was.

Kamar Taj, Kathmandu, 1223 A.D.

For seventeen years Loki visited them every year for at least a week, but often three or even four weeks. They spent many hours in the library, going over ancient texts together, followed by equally as many hours in the courtyard, where they demonstrated spells to each other and held practice duals, often under the watchful eye of the Ancient One, who was happy enough to let Loki learn their magic, as long as Harry and Tom wrote down all they learned from Loki in return and added it to the library so others could study these new kinds of magic as well.

It truly was an exchange of knowledge, which benefited everyone.

On a personal level, Harry and Tom gained a great friend in Loki. They learned that he was still quite young for a god, barely more than 200, but already an adult in the eyes of his people.

This was a good thing, because quite early on Harry and Tom decided to seduce him into their bed. After all, how often did you get a chance to bag an actual god? They both found him attractive and appreciated his intelligence and wicked sense of humour.

For the most part, Harry and Tom were happy to stay monogamous throughout their many lives, not desiring to bed others. But very occasionally, they came across a person they were happy to make an exception for, and Loki was such a person.

As it turned out, getting Loki into their bed didn’t take much seducing, since he liked them both well enough and was curious about bedding humans, so their friendship quickly turned into a friendship with benefits.

And what benefits they were! Loki was a god, and had an absolutely divine stamina, not to mention a huge dick, and he had no problems completely satisfying two very eager and horny women many times a night.

Their yak-hair mattress was put to the test quite a few times over the years, while the elven blanket kept them warm afterwards as they snuggled together until sleep claimed them.

Every year, Harry and Tom eagerly awaited Loki’s visits. The rest of the time they continued to travel the world looking for students, and teaching the students at Kamar Taj whenever they spent time at the temple.

But after seventeen years of visits like clockwork, Loki didn’t show up.

“He’s probably being held up by Odin,” Tom said while they were curled around each other in their bed.

“Yeah. God knows Loki’s complained about him and Thor often enough in the past. Odin might have sent him on some useless quest or given him an impossible task.” Harry sighed, pressing a little closer to Tom. “I’m just worried something serious has happened. It sucks we can’t just call him to see if he’s all right.”

Tom pressed a kiss to Harry’s temple. “I know. We just need to be patient.”

Loki showed up at Kamar Taj the next year, hale and whole and utterly exasperated because he wasn’t alone. “Tom, Harry, this is my brother Thor and his friend Fandral.”

“Mortals,” Thor boomed, appearing larger than life in his red cape with his hammer in his hand. “Loki speaks well of you. It appears you have thrived under the Allfather’s rule.”

Fandral insisted on kissing both Harry’s and Tom’s hands, the smarmy bastard. “Loki certainly didn’t mention the beauty of the females of this realm.”

“Ugh,” Harry said, wiping the back of her hand on her pants. “Just so you know, I’m this close to summoning a hippopotamus, pal.”

“Please do,” Loki muttered behind her with a straight face.

The visit was in one word a disaster. Thor insulted just about everyone he met without even realizing it, broke every cup or plate he got his hands on, and insisted humans ought to be extremely grateful for Asgard’s rule. Fandral spent all his time trying to seduce every woman he met, the Ancient One included, and quite a few of the men as well. Harry ignored it until Fandral set his sights on a few of their twelve and thirteen-year-old female students and then she summoned a hippopotamus which soundly trampled a very surprised Fandral until Thor smooshed it with his hammer. Then there was blood and gore everywhere and a very exuberant Thor exclaimed he mightily enjoyed Midgardian sports.

Loki kept shooting everyone at Kamar Taj apologetic looks and smiles. He was a welcomed guest at their temple for many years now, and he clearly felt more than embarrassed at the behaviour of Thor and Fandral.

“Thor caught me sneaking away last year,” Loki whispered to Harry and Tom during one of the very few quiet moments of his visit. “He demanded to come along this year or else he would inform Odin of my illicit trips to Midgard.”

“So you weren’t joking when you mentioned your brother is an arrogant tosspot,” Harry whispered back.

“Alas, no.” Loki could say no more because Thor was about to smash an ancient statue in the courtyard and Loki hurried over to stop him.

That visit was cut very short, but the next year Loki appeared as normal, without any unwanted guests that time. Both Harry and Tom gave him long hugs and lots of kisses and

they spent a whole night getting reacquainted together. Harry had genuinely missed him, and she knew Tom felt the same, since they'd talked about it together a time or two.

It was a foundation of their relationship together. Tom and Harry loved each other so much, and were so sure of the love the other had for them, that the idea of developing feelings for someone else didn't jeopardize their own relationship in the slightest. Harry knew with certainty that no matter how much Tom might start to love Loki, she would never stop loving Harry because of it, and vice versa.

"We missed you," Harry whispered after they were physically spent, Harry and Tom snuggling against Loki from both sides. Loki had an arm wrapped around both of them, holding them close.

"I have missed you both, too," Loki replied while he looked between one and the other. "I have been able to spend time in the national library of Vanaheim this year and I've looked into your unique situation, but alas, I was unable to find anything useful."

They had told Loki about their endless cycle of reincarnation many years ago, and Loki had been intrigued and promised to scour every library he could in Asgard and the other realms to see if he could find anything useful for them. So far, no luck.

"We appreciate your help," Tom said, rubbing her cheek against Loki's chest, her eyes drooping shut.

"I will continue to look for information," Loki promised them before they all fell asleep.

That whole visit went as usual, with Loki spending two weeks with them. However, the next year there was no Loki, only a short note that appeared out of nowhere on their elven blanket one morning.

My dearest Harry and Tom,

Thor, in a fit of his usual rage, has told the Allfather about my trips to Midgard to study your magic. The Allfather has forbidden me to return, citing the humans' need for isolation because they are far too primitive to learn Asgardian magic. He literally compared humans to goats. I cannot return this year, and perhaps not for a few more years to come, but know that I am thinking of you both and that I will find a way to return to you as soon as I can.

Yours in utmost sincerity,

Loki

"Damn," Harry whispered around a lump in her throat.

Tom inhaled a deep breath, releasing it slowly. "I wonder if Loki realizes how quickly humans actually age."

Harry stared at Tom with wide eyes. "Huh." Harry had just turned fifty, with Tom not far behind. Harry's black hair was starting to streak with grey and there were lines around her eyes and mouth, but she was still in excellent shape. The same was true for Tom. They were

both very active and ate a healthy diet, and for the time they received pretty decent healthcare at the temple. Still, the times they lived in were challenging the older you got. People got all sorts of ailments that in modern times could easily be treated with medication or a simple surgery, but in the times Harry and Tom lived in might very well prove fatal.

Harry gave Tom a brave smile. “Let’s hope Loki finds a way to come see us soon. He is the God of Mischief, after all. I’m sure he can manage something.”

Kamar Taj, Kathmandu, 1254 A.D.

Loki showed up on a crisp October morning, thirty-one years after they’d seen him last.

Harry, an old woman of eight-one at that point, greeted him with a watery smile, her small frame slightly bent while she used a cane to support herself going up steps.

“Where’s Tom?” Loki asked, obviously taken aback by the way Harry looked.

“Some fourteen years ago we had a bad flu season. It might even have been a new strain,” Harry said, her voice cracking slightly. The Cloak gently pulled on her frail frame, urging her to sit down on a nearby bench in the entrance hall. That thing was a bigger mother hen than even Tom whenever Harry suffered from some malady. “Tom got pneumonia and died.”

“No.” Loki’s face paled, his hands trembling as he pulled something out of thin air. “I’ve come too late.” In his hands rested two golden apples.

“Oh, Loki,” Harry said, a tear dripping down her cheek. “The Ancient One told me you’d visit one more time, that’s why I stayed, to tell you personally what happened. But I have to follow Tom.”

“Please,” Loki said, lowering himself to his knees in front of Harry and pressing one golden apple in her wrinkled hand. “This apple will heal you, whatever ails you will disappear. Please stay.”

For a moment, Harry could see it. They could sneak into the Ancient One’s quarters, borrow the Eye of Agamotto and use the time stone within to save Tom from dying by giving him a golden apple. And then Harry and Tom could spend many years to come by Loki’s side.

But somewhere deep inside her, Harry knew that wasn’t what was supposed to happen. Tom was supposed to die, and Harry too, so they could be reunited again in a new life. As much as it pained Harry, she had to go and leave Loki behind. “I am so sorry, Loki. I wish I could stay, but I can’t.” She placed her trembling hand on Loki’s strong one.

“I tried to come sooner,” Loki said, gaze fixed on their joined hands. “But the Allfather sent me on at least a dozen diplomatic trips all over the nine realms, one after the other, claiming it was training for when Thor ascends the throne of Asgard and I become his main advisor.”

“I don’t blame you, Loki. Sometimes things don’t go the way we want them to.” Harry paused for a moment before delivering more bad news. “I’m dying.”

Loki closed his eyes and bit his lip.

“I would prefer to die with someone I love by my side,” Harry said, and Loki snapped his eyes open and stared at her in wonder, as if he was seeing something he’d never seen before. “Would you please do the honours, Loki?”

Loki nodded without hesitation. “Yes, of course.”

“Good, then let’s go. I want to see the mountains one last time.” Harry forced herself to her feet, bones cracking and creaking. Loki gently grabbed her shoulder to steady her, while the Cloak helped her stay upright.

The Ancient One approached them before they reached the front door, looking not a day older than when Harry had first met her. Tom had figured out she became immortal by draining energy from the dark dimension, but that was her business. Harry refused to judge her for it.

“Loki, do not despair,” Hilda said. Harry had finagled that name out of her years ago. “You will see Harry and Tom again. They will return to this world, though it will be many years.”

“Really?” Harry smiled at her, genuinely happy with that news. “Well then, this won’t be a goodbye, but a see you later.”

“See you later, Harry,” the Ancient One said, eyes suspiciously bright.

Harry nodded and let Loki guide her out the building. It took them ages and ages to get to the mountains, but Loki did not once complain about having to take tiny steps as not to get ahead of Harry. He did offer to carry her once.

“Are you fucking nuts?” Harry said while glaring up at him. “I’ve got legs. Old as they may be, they still work, so I’m using them.”

But after an hour or two the Cloak got fed up and simply levitated her half a foot off the ground while moving forward.

“I swear, that thing gets sassier the older I get,” Harry grumbled, but was secretively relieved since her back and her legs were killing her.

Loki laughed at her, and Harry cherished the sound.

Harry selected her favourite viewing spot of the snow-capped mountains. “I will never not be in awe of this sight,” Harry said as she carefully lowered herself to the ground with Loki’s and the Cloak’s help.

“It is impressive,” Loki agreed, sitting down beside her and wrapping a strong arm around Harry’s small shoulders, pulling her close.

“The highest in our world,” Harry said with a large amount of pride. “I’m so glad I got to see you again. I’ll tell Tom, he’ll be happy to hear you’re doing all right, too. We’ve been so worried about you.”

Loki nodded and buried his face in Harry's long grey hair. "Aren't you scared?"

"To die? Not anymore." Harry grabbed one of Loki's hands and pressed a kiss to the back of it. "I'm excited to see Tom again and curious what our next life will be like. It may be absolute shit or absolutely amazing." Harry pulled back a little so she could look at Loki, whose eyes were brimming with tears. "This was such a good life, and you were one of the main reasons for that. I'm so glad we got to meet you, Loki."

"I will miss you both," Loki whispered, pressing a few soft kisses to Harry's wrinkled face, his cheeks wet with tears.

"We will miss you, too, but we'll see you again. I'm sure of that." Harry's breathing was laboured at that point, her whole body aching. Harry suspected she had cancer, though what kind she wasn't sure. But she'd died of it more than a few times now and knew what it felt like. She'd spent all of her energy these last few weeks holding on until Loki came so she could say goodbye. She leaned heavier against Loki, the pain slowly retreating as her hearing went out. The Cloak wrapped around them both tightly, and Harry smiled as she stared at the mountains, Loki's lips pressed against her cheek, until that too faded away along with everything else.

Life # 90: That time Harry and Tom faced a zombie apocalypse.

Chapter Summary

Life # 90: That time Harry and Tom faced a zombie apocalypse.

Chapter Notes

I might do a part two for this particular life at some point in the future, because it ran very long.

With my sincerest apologies to Max Brooks, whose book World War Z you should go read if you haven't already. It is one of my all-time favourite books and I couldn't resist 'adding' it to this story.

Thanks so much for reading and commenting. They always make my day.

Naval Medical Centre Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, 2014

Harry woke up in a Marines military hospital in North Carolina, missing a spleen, a uterus and two lower legs, but having gained 90 lifetimes worth of memories without even meeting her soulmate.

“Sergeant Broussard,” Lieutenant General Jacobs said as he stood solemnly beside Harry’s bed, hands clasped behind his back, shoulders ramrod straight. “I have received nothing but reports of your excellence and unparalleled bravery in the field as you saved Captain Williams’ life. I want you to know I am recommending you for a medal of honour.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Harry managed to say before promptly passing out again. The next time she awoke, ten hours later, she asked after her partner.

“What happened to Vinnie?” Harry looked at Major Crenshaw, who was briefing her on the happenings of the past two weeks, ever since Harry got shot up saving her Captain’s life in Afghanistan.

Major Crenshaw pursed his lips for a moment. “I’m sorry to tell you your partner didn’t make it, but he died shielding your body from even more direct hits.”

Harry nodded, eyes welling up. “Yeah, that was something he’d do. Loyal to a fault.”

“And brave,” Major Crenshaw added with a warm smile. “Just like his handler.”

After Major Crenshaw left, leaving a huge pile of paperwork for Harry to go through, Harry shed a few tears for her feisty Malinois Vinnie, a k9 Marine trained to find roadside I.E.D.s, to protect the troops patrolling Afghanistan, and Harry’s best friend for the years she operated as a k9 handler in the Marines, working her way up to the rank of Staff Sergeant. Their last mission, accompanying Captain Williams and his team as he tried to instruct the newly appointed local police officers, had ended in an ambush. Shots were fired from both sides, with Captain Williams pinned down and the two Marines with him killed almost instantly.

And Harry was a Gryffindor through and through, even when she didn’t remember it yet, and she figured between the two of them, Captain Williams, a decent and honest guy with a wife and three kids, had more reasons to go home than she did, since she had no immediate family left, nor a spouse or kids waiting for her.

So Harry, with brave Vinnie in tow, made a move, saving the good Captain and getting mowed down in a spray of bullets from all directions in the process. She’d felt her lower legs give out, the bones shattering and the flesh tearing, but she’d passed out moments later so the pain had been minimal.

But that was then and this was now, and Harry sat up in her hospital bed and sipped a glass of orange juice as she took stock of her life thus far. Born Jasmine Broussard in New Orleans, to an African American mother and a creole father, who’d been unhappily married for about half a minute before divorcing because her useless father liked beating on her mother and she was having none of that, after which her father took off to parts unknown and leaving her mom to work two and a half jobs to raise her child by herself. And because none of her minimum wage jobs offered healthcare, when her mom got a nasty cut on her leg during her waitressing job from an irate customer throwing a glass at her, she didn’t go to the emergency room for stitches, but dressed the wound herself at home, which resulted in a nasty infection that turned septic, killing her mother within hours.

And six-year-old Harry moved in with her maternal grandparents, loving, hard-working people who did their best raising her. Harry’s grandfather, a kind man full of wisdom beyond his age, and a bus driver for the city, died ten years later from a sudden heart attack, with Harry’s grandmother following him a year later from complications of diabetes and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

Seventeen-year-old Harry ended up living on her Aunt Jackie’s couch. Aunt Jackie was a single mother working three jobs while raising her four kids after her husband developed a drug addiction from prescription opioids and ended up in and out of prison and AA programs. Harry was just happy to have a roof over her head while she finished high school.

But there was no money for college, and Harry’s grades weren’t anything to write home about the last few years, what with all the stress of losing her grandparents the way she did, so scholarships were out of the question as well. But Harry’s grandfather had served in the Marines and had always told Harry stories about his time there that were mostly positive, and Harry figured joining the Marines was an excellent way to earn money now, save some of that, and afterwards go to college and get a degree while Uncle Sam footed the bill.

And Harry had loved the Marines. She enjoyed the discipline and the camaraderie and was good at the work required, and while there were assholes who tried to spoil her experience, Harry had grown up in some pretty rough neighbourhoods in New Orleans. She wasn't easily intimidated by any asshole trying to put her down. So when her active duty enlistment ended, Harry decided to stay and basically go pro by reenlisting as active duty. It wasn't as if she had anything or anyone waiting for her in the civilian world, and she honestly didn't even know what she wanted to study should she decide to go to college after all.

Nah, the Marine corps was her home now, and Harry got accepted as a new k9 handler, which was her dream job. She got paired with Vinnie, a strong-willed young Belgian shepherd who inexplicably decided Harry was his favourite person in the whole world and worked amazingly well for her, and that partnership lasted for two years before it all went to hell.

And now Harry had lost her job and her legs.

Well, fuck.

On the other hand, she did regain her memories, so she knew she'd be all right. She had a hundred ideas already for the rest of her life, starting with finding Tom as soon as possible. But of course, that's not how it worked. Harry discreetly tried all the types of magic she knew, hoping something worked and might aid her in her search for her soulmate, but none of the types of magic she tried actually did anything, which meant this was what Harry and Tom referred to as a 'dead world', a place without any magic at all.

So Harry simply had to be patient and let Tom find her the natural way, which might be many years yet.

Ugh. Harry hated getting her memories back before she met up with Tom. On the other hand, having her memories would make her life easier going forward, so Harry focused on that, trying to stay positive, even when she suffered from a mild depression.

She worked her ass off during physical therapy, learning how to first get around in a wheel chair and later how to walk with prosthetics. Harry had lost limbs before, but never both legs right below the knees simultaneously, and it took some getting used to.

At the same time, Harry faced the bureaucratic hell that was the VA, the US Department of Veterans Affairs. She was too young and had served too few years to qualify for any retirement pay, but she did have a right to Disability Compensation, but actually getting any of it was easier said than done. Thankfully, even before getting her memories back, Harry had been pretty smart with her money, so she had more than enough in her savings account to hire an attorney specializing in helping veterans getting what they were owed by the government. That man was worth his weight in gold when he got Harry the highest percentage of Disability Compensation, with Special Monthly Compensation added to that since she'd lost two limbs and her reproductive organs, and he got her all of that within a year, which was lightning fast by VA standards.

All in all, Harry ended up receiving over \$6500 tax-free every month, retroactively and for the rest of her life.

Nice. It had only cost her two legs and a chance to ever have kids of her own, but still, very nice. And a huge relief that now Harry didn't have to worry about money and could focus on her physical and mental recovery.

Yeah, Harry had PTSD.

Joy.

PTSD was like an old friend that you rather not reconnected with, but who showed up at your doorstep uninvited every few lives anyway. It had nothing to do with their souls, but with the kind of lives they sometimes led. Traumatic experiences made an impact on your brain, resulting in post-traumatic stress disorder, plain and simple, no matter how tough you thought you were.

And while it sucked having it, Harry was familiar with it, so with the help of some therapy and some meds, she was able to keep it under control, for the most part.

Harry decided that since she didn't have to worry about money for a good, long while and thus didn't have to run out and find employment, she could do whatever she liked.

And one thing both Harry and Tom loved about living in the good old USA was the ability to full-time RV. Travelling across the country while living full-time in a recreational vehicle was all kinds of awesome, and Harry and Tom had done it a number of times before. Sometimes as a younger couple with kids, working on the road to earn a living, and sometimes once they were retired and they decided to spend the final years of their life enjoying the natural beauty of the USA.

So when Harry was physically and mentally as healed as she was going to get anytime soon, and Uncle Sam had provided her with two new, titanium legs, she sold or donated almost all her possessions that she couldn't take with her and went looking for a home on wheels.

Thanks to the retroactive pay, plus her own savings account, Harry could easily afford a gently used C-class RV. She had considered buying a van and building the interior herself, but she decided against it in the end. Having a full bathroom in a van was pretty much impossible due to the small size, and Harry wanted a decent toilet and shower that she could easily use without her prosthetics.

Harry also bought a small, beat-up Jeep to tow behind the RV, so she could set up camp in a RV park or on BLM land, public land owned by the government where you were allowed to camp, and use the Jeep to get around without having to constantly haul the whole RV around when wanting to do some sightseeing or get a few groceries.

Right after Harry bought her RV and was ready to head onto the open road, she got a phone call from a fellow Marine k9 handler, whose dog had been involved in an I.E.D. explosion and had partially lost his vision and hearing and could therefore no longer work as a Marine K9 and needed to be retired. The Marine, named John Millstone, wasn't in a position to adopt him, but had heard of Harry and hoped she would take him.

Vader, as was the dog's name, was a littermate and thus full brother of Vinnie, the dog Harry had lost in Afghanistan.

Harry didn't have to think about that for more than a second, and a week later she picked Vader up from the Marine base. The poor dog was missing an ear and had scars across one side of his face but otherwise was in good health. Vader was a little confused at first about what was going on and about living in an RV, but Harry took him on plenty of long walks and gave him lots of treats and pets and endless games of fetch the tennis ball, and before long Vader happily decided Harry was his new boss and that was that.

Since Vader was a very well trained dog who was used to working day in and day out, Harry decided to turn him into her service dog. Vader could easily help her with any mobility issues, not to mention with her PTSD. Harry trained him to stand at her back in stores and to find exits in case she got a flashback or panic attack, and Vader bonded with her readily and to such an extent Harry could also easily teach him to keep an eye on her anxiety levels through her breathing and overall scent and thus alerting her before she descended into a full blown anxiety attack.

And, just for fun, she regularly let Vader search her RV inside and out for I.E.D.s, even if he never found any.

All in all, Vader got a new job that suited him and his own disabilities and Harry got to have a new best friend and a helpful service dog that accompanied her everywhere she went.

Harry travelled through the south while heading west. She craved the open skies and the natural beauty of places like Wyoming and Utah, of Arizona and New Mexico. Not to mention, she craved the many kinds of BBQ she encountered on the road. Just for fun she started an Instagram account to document and rate all the ribs and brisket and smoked sausages she ate, with mouth-watering pictures. On the way west she also passed through her hometown of New Orleans and spent some weeks there visiting family since she had a couple of aunts and uncles and a bunch of cousins that still lived there, and who all insisted she stop by.

Of course, once she was sitting on her Aunt Jackie's couch after having enjoyed a dinner of her amazing gumbo, surrounded by her extended family, she realized it had all been a set-up when the President called and told her that she had decided to award Harry the Medal of Honour. Her family cheered so hard, jumping and dancing around the room that Harry had trouble even understanding the President, but the message was clear.

Get your ass to Washington D.C., and bring the family, because you are getting a shiny medal, which comes with an additional \$1000 tax-free each month for the rest of your life.

And so Harry and family got on an airplane, got to meet the first female President of the USA (a democrat Harry had voted for, so that was extra nice) and Harry became the first female combatant to receive the Medal of Honour. Not the first female, though. Harry was sure to give credit where credit was due during her acceptance speech, mentioning Mary Edwards Walker, a Civil War surgeon who received it many years before Harry.

And after that Harry got to talk to a few reporters for major newspapers about her experiences, and even appear on a late night talk show or two, Vader by her side, to tell both their stories, since the American public loved their veterans, especially those that got shiny medals through acts of courage and bravery. Harry took it all in stride, since this was her second time receiving a Medal of Honour, so she knew what to expect.

She was still genuinely honoured, though, and very regretful Tom couldn't be there to share in the celebrations.

To keep her mind occupied and to help with her PTSD, Harry took to writing fiction even while she was still in the hospital, as she had done in many, many lives before. Some lives she simply typed out earlier novels from previous lives and published them online on places like Amazon to earn a living quickly. But this life she wasn't in urgent need of more money and so she took the time to develop a whole new story, one about a Marine squad comprised of werewolves and other shifters, plus a witch, who travelled the world fighting any number of supernatural threats. Harry wrote it as a series, and published the first two novels on Amazon, where it got a nice bit of traction right from the start, earning her a few hundred dollars extra every month in sales.

Harry got a retirement account going and every month like clockwork made generous payments into it, knowing from much experience that having a little nest egg for their golden years would make life that much easier. Especially since the USA wasn't known for their generous social policies, nor their affordable healthcare.

Now, since Harry had been so busy over the past one-and-a-half years, with her recovery and getting her life back in order, all the while trying not to expire from missing her soulmate too much, she hadn't been paying too much attention to the news. Yes, she'd heard the reports about the Cambodian Virus, which any number of conspiracy theorists named the China Virus, since they claimed it came from there and the Chinese government had spent months covering their own outbreaks up. It seemed to be a virus related to rabies, so while it caused quite severe symptoms and even death, it wasn't very infectious and required transmission through bodily fluids.

Simply living through a pandemic didn't alarm Harry as much as it might have once upon a time. She'd lived through so many pandemics already during so many lives. Everything from relatively harmless pandemics caused by a novel corona virus or a mild new flu strain all the way to the Spanish flu that killed more people than the first world war, and the bubonic plague in medieval Europe that killed half the people around them, including eventually Harry and Tom themselves. Not a good way to go, Harry did not recommend the Black Death whatsoever.

So just the fact that there was apparently a new pandemic happening didn't alarm Harry. She kept her distance from others anyway, thanks to her PTSD, and spent most of her time camping on remote BLM land, avoiding big cities and their bustling crowds and loud noises. So she hadn't kept up with the news as she perhaps should have, since it appeared the pandemic was not a whole lot more serious than a simple corona virus.

That fact smacked Harry right in the face while she drove into a nice boondocking spot on some BLM land in southern Utah. There was already another RV there while Harry parked

her rig on a sheltered site near some rocky drop-offs, which offered a fantastic view of the brown cliffs and valleys and the mountains in the distance.

“Hi!” the lady from the fifth-wheel RV next to her called out the moment Harry stepped out of her rig to level it, Vader following closely behind.

“Good afternoon,” Harry called back.

“I’m Annette. My husband Ted is sleeping, he’s feeling a bit under the weather.” Annette seemed a little wary of Vader, who in turn seemed wary of Annette and her rig.

Curious. Vader was usually a pretty social dog. Not the type to demand affection from every stranger he met, but nice enough to accept every new person he met as long as Harry told him it was fine.

“I’m Jasmine, and this is my service dog Vader,” Harry called back with a little wave. “I gotta set up my rig, but maybe we can have a chat later?” Harry knew from experience that RVers tended to be a social bunch, always ready for a talk, to socialize and exchange experiences. Those that didn’t like interacting with others simply stayed to themselves, often selecting locations even more remote than where they were at that time. Harry generally didn’t mind meeting new people, especially because on the road you oftentimes had to depend on other travellers if you ran into any kind of trouble, so being sociable was a must to get by as a full-time RVer, especially a solo one travelling alone.

“Sure, you do that.” Annette walked up to her rig, pausing at the door. “I made some cinnamon buns from scratch this morning. Stop by later for some coffee and you’ll be in for a real treat.”

“Thanks, I’ll be sure to do that, right after dinner.” With another wave from Harry, Annette disappeared inside her fifth wheel, and Harry went about setting up her own camp. She debated unhooking her Jeep, but decided against it since there might be some storms moving into that area later, and Harry wanted to be able to get the hell out of dodge in case of potential flash floods. The area was prone to them. So she simply levelled her rig, turned on the propane to cook some dinner and checked the water level, which was almost complete full, while her black and grey tanks were empty. Her solar panels on the roof were charging her batteries, and on the way there she’d stocked up on groceries and other essentials, so she was good to boondock for up to two weeks without having to return to civilization. That meant lots of time to hike with Vader and to finish her third novel of her werewolf Marines book series.

The prosthetics Harry used really were state of the art and allowed her to do pretty much anything someone with legs could do, including running and hiking. And Harry made sure to do both regularly, for both her and Vader’s well-being, and because it led them to some amazing places. Harry’s personal Instagram account was mostly pictures of Vader posing in front of mountains and rivers and meadows and oceans, all places they encountered during their many hikes and runs.

Vader sat with his back to Harry, who was unrolling her awning and setting up her camping chair and table so she could dine outside later in the mild April weather. A low growl rose

from Vader's chest as he stared intently at the neighbouring rig some thirty yards away.

"What is it, buddy?" Harry asked, taking in Vader's stiff body and raised hackles. She trusted her dog's opinion on any situation blindly, and Vader did not like their new neighbours one bit, though Harry had no clue why as Annette had seemed like your run of the mill middle-aged RV wife travelling with her husband, perhaps enjoying an early retirement.

An ear-piercing scream erupted from the fifth-wheel, followed by loud crashing and banging noises.

"What the fuck?" Harry reached inside the opened storage compartment from which she'd just pulled her table and chair, and yanked out the metal baseball bat she kept there for security purposes. She had lots of different kinds of weapons stuffed all over her rig, because she was a woman travelling alone, big ass Malinois at her side or not. Some were obvious weapons, like the baseball bat or the handful of knives she had, and others were not so obvious, like the knitting needles she kept on hand. Harry loved knitting, found it very therapeutic and a fun way to spend some time, but most importantly, metal knitting needles made for awesome weapons.

Back when they were slayers, Harry had once killed an eight foot Prezal demon by driving her knitting needles through its eyes into its brain. It had ruined her knitting, a fluffy scarf she was knitting Tom for Christmas, but it had been an awesome kill. And ever since then Harry made it a point to keep metal knitting needles on hand, especially in situation where she couldn't possess genuine weapons for whatever reason. No one ever suspected someone with a few balls of yarn and a collection of knitting needles might be lethal with the things.

Harry patted her jeans pocket, making sure the stiletto she always kept there was still in place and then she hurried towards the fifth wheel, from which more screams sounded, followed by more crashing until it finally became quiet, aside from some tearing noises.

Trying the doorhandle and finding it unlocked, Harry yanked the door open and stared, frozen in place, unsure what she was seeing. For a moment, Harry was certain she was having an episode brought on by her PTSD and she wasn't sure if what she was seeing was real or not.

A man, obviously dead judging by his grey, bloodless complexion and milky eyes, leaning over a whimpering and bleeding Annette, tearing bits of flesh from her stomach and eating them, chewing methodically.

Harry knew she couldn't always trust her own brain thanks to her mental illnesses, but she also knew she could trust her dog with her life and behind her Vader was freaking the fuck out, barking and growling in ways Harry had never heard him do before, not even that time a grizzly bear came sniffing around their rig while they were camping in Yellowstone National Park. And that was all the confirmation Harry needed that what she was seeing was real and she needed to act now.

Raising the baseball bat as if she was about to swing for a homerun, Harry hopped inside the RV and hit the guy against the side of his head as hard as she could. His skull seemed softer than it should be for some reason and cracked open like a walnut. The guy tipped over to the

side, strips of bloody meat dangling from his mouth, whole face smeared with blood, and he stopped moving.

“Annette, what happened?” Harry quickly took in the scene, Annette’s injuries, the amount of blood on the floor, and realized that any help that could get to their remote location would come too late to save Annette’s life.

“Ted,” Annette all but breathed, eyes glassy as she stared straight up. Harry wasn’t sure if she even knew Harry was there. “Got sick after bite...homeless man...Walmart.”

Yeah, Harry wasn’t fucking stupid and she’d seen more than enough horror movies to know what she was dealing with, however unlikely that might seem.

Fucking zombies.

Ugh.

Harry hated zombies of any kind, period. Fucking things.

Annette gurgled and breathed her last and Harry waited patiently to see what would happen next.

And yep, within ten minutes, Annette, who’d been very dead just seconds before, started moving again, white, milky eyes fixed intently on Harry. Enough of that shit. Harry raised her bat again and hit Annette in the head until her skull split open and she stopped moving again.

And then Harry was at a loss of what to do.

Call the police?

The second that thought entered her mind, Harry looked down at her own arms as she lowered the bloody bat and once again noticed the colour of her own skin. She was black this life. Well, technically she was the offspring of a black woman and a creole father, who was mostly white with a little bit of everything mixed in, so Harry qualified as mixed-race, but to the po-po, she was definitely black.

And there she was, a violent, mentally disturbed black woman who just beat two white people ‘to death’ with a baseball bat, because that is how the police would see it, no matter they had been actual fucking zombies, but somehow Harry doubted anyone on the police force or at the DA’s office was going to believe her anytime soon, medal of honour be damned.

Yeah, time to get the fuck out of there.

There were lives Harry was happy to play the good Samaritan and help the authorities and all that shit, but it wasn’t while she was black in the USA, thank you very much. That was how you got shot and killed by the police. And Harry refused to die before meeting Tom, even though she’d already technically died when she got her memories back, but she had no idea what would happen if she died for real before meeting Tom and giving him his memories back and Harry wasn’t about to find out.

Harry didn't touch anything, just closed the door and wiped the sleeve of her hoodie over the handle a few times to get rid of fingerprints because she had been a cop herself enough times to know you had to get rid of those or they'd get you.

Thankfully, Harry didn't have any immediate neighbours other than the late Ted and Annette, and she doubted anyone else had seen or heard anything. The camping sites were too far apart for that, tucked away in rocky nooks and crannies only accessible by winding, dusty roads. Moving like the po-po were going to arrive to arrest her any second, Harry put her campsite away in record time. Table and chair were shoved back into the storage compartment, the awning was retracted, as were the levelling jacks. Harry did a quick walkaround her rig to see if she'd forgotten anything before hopping inside and closing and locking her door. She grabbed a couple of granola bars, an apple, a can of diet cola and a bottle of water and placed those in a convenient basket she kept on the dashboard. And after a quick pee break Harry sat down behind the wheel and took off in a hurry.

She drove for a few hours to the nearest mid-sized town, munching on her snacks so she wouldn't pass out from hunger. She passed a gas station and filled up her RV tank, even though it was more than half-full, and she also topped off the Jeep, because fucking zombies, man. And then she found the nearest Walmart and parked her rig on their parking lot under one of the streetlights. Walmart generally allowed RVers to spend the night on their parking lots, except in very busy, touristy areas. Thankfully, southern Utah wasn't that big of a tourist hotspot that time of year, so Harry knew she'd be all right there overnight.

She grabbed her phone and keys, put Vader's harness and leash on him and then let him do his business in some bushes on the edge of the parking lot, carefully monitoring his behaviour to see if perhaps more zombies were nearby. Vader had obviously reacted to Ted's infection, even from a distance, so from then on Harry would be keeping an extra careful eye on her dog's reactions to his environment.

After Vader was done they headed into Walmart, where Harry got a cart because she had some serious shopping to do, because fucking zombies, man.

First two hunting rifles. Not the most ideal weapon to fight zombies up close, but perfect to take them out from a distance and Harry was an excellent shot, having honed her skills over many lifetimes. Next was a shotgun, and plenty of ammo for all three weapons. Walmart didn't sell any handguns, but they did have ammo for them so Harry stocked up on that as well, and tomorrow she'd find a gun store and buy some smaller guns. Up until that time Harry hadn't bothered with owning a handgun because she travelled across state lines all the times and even had plans to head into Canada that upcoming summer and doing so with firearms was a pain in the behind, and Harry was just as capable of keeping herself safe with a few knives and some knitting needles so she didn't really need any guns. Until now, because fucking zombies, man.

Next were non-perishable foods. Bags of brown rice and pinto beans and pasta, together with cans of veggies and pasta sauce and spam. Harry also stocked up on water filters great and small, so she could refill her RV water tank from a fucking puddle on the road if she had to and still be able to drink the water.

Lastly, a few large bags of dogfood for Vader and then Harry felt a little calmer at last. She paid for everything with her debit card, since she wasn't hurting for money at all and a large purchase like that wasn't a problem.

She tucked everything away in her RV, having to cram a few things in the wardrobe and using the shower stall to temporarily store the dogfood, but it worked. Then she loaded the guns and placed them around the rig strategically. And then, after making sure all doors and windows were closed and locked, Harry changed into her pyjamas, took off her prosthetics and crawled into bed, phone on the charger so she could mooch of Walmart's free WIFI as long as she needed to find out what the fuck was going on.

It had to be that Cambodian Virus thing that was going around but how the fuck did no one notice it was turning people into fucking zombies?

Turns out, people did notice, but what Harry suspected was an intentional campaign of misinformation played those people off as conspiracy theorists, general wack jobs, crazy crackheads and con artists. And it wasn't just in the USA. Harry searched news sites big and small across the world and noticed a definite pattern of denying the fact that the Cambodian Virus caused the dead to rise and eat the living.

Any pictures and video clips were called fake and before long disappeared from whatever site they were posted on. And in numerous countries, including the USA, those who announced the truth loudest and got the most traction with the public suddenly found themselves arrested on drugs charges, or worse, became the victims of a sudden case of 'suicide' or they simply disappeared without a trace altogether.

Someone was desperate to keep the truth from getting out, and Harry was pretty sure she knew who was behind it. Harry and Tom had lived so many lives that they'd learned the truth about what made the world go round eventually.

The truth was: money.

Not very revolutionary, Harry knew, but it was money and those who had the most of it who literally ran the entire world. Harry wasn't talking about some movie star or singer with a few million in the bank or someone who'd invested in a few rental properties and made a very comfortable living that way.

No, Harry was talking about the elite. The less than one percent. The majority stock holders and the CEOs of multinationals and those that came from old money, inherited over many generations.

They were the people in charge of the world. They were the ones who owned the politicians on all sides, who were little more than puppets to give the masses the idea they had a say in what laws were made and how the country was run. In truth, it was the elite who arranged for all of that. They used hot topics like abortion and religion and climate change to rile up the people on all sides and get them to vote for whatever puppet they wanted to be in charge, but in truth they cared nothing about those causes.

They only cared about money and how they could keep making more of it over the minimum wage workers' broken backs.

How did Harry know this? Simple. She and Tom had been part of the ruling elite in a few lives. They knew first-hand how the world really worked.

But what would happen to the ruling elite if it got out there was a zombie pandemic on the horizon? That there was a genuine apocalypse looming? Simple. Wall street would crash, the economy would tank and the elite would lose some of their money and influence.

So instead of using their money and power to nip the zombie apocalypse in the butt, they'd rather set up the whole of humanity to die out of sheer misinformation and ignorance than to see themselves lose some of their ill-gotten fortunes.

Harry glanced at the clock. It was almost 3 AM, but Harry was unable to sleep now that she understood what was happening and how little she could do about that. A single person was no match to go up against the ruling elite and their global PR machines. Using her arms, Harry hopped to the side of her bed and put her prosthetics on again and then pulled on a long coat that covered most of her pyjamas. Vader seemed happy enough to go for another walk, and Harry headed back into Walmart and bought a video camera and a GoPro, and various clamps and harnesses so she could mount it on her body.

From now on, Harry would be filming the zombies she encountered. She wasn't yet sure if she wanted to go full blown rebel set to expose the truth to the world, but she liked having that option down the road. Because what was happening just didn't sit well with Harry.

Zombies were not that difficult to kill. A reasonably healthy six-year-old with a shovel and good aim could probably manage it. But left unchecked, zombies multiplied like crazy, infecting anyone they killed to become another zombie. Exponential growth was a thing that applied to the zombie apocalypse as well.

But because of all the deliberate misinformation and downright lies, the average person wasn't prepared to deal with zombies, no matter one or two zombies were easy enough to deal with if one knew how. No, the average person would react like Ted and Annette, mistaking a fucking zombie for a homeless person or a tripped out drug addict, getting bit and just staying in bed a few days hoping the infection would clear up on its own before dying, turning into a flesh-eating monster and killing and eating your own spouse.

That is how a zombie apocalypse started. Because average, everyday people were deliberately kept ignorant.

Well, Harry had been around for a whole lot of lives already and wasn't so easily hoodwinked. At the very least she would make sure she and Vader survived long enough to find Tom and then they'd see what they would do. After all, once reunited, Harry and Tom could always decide to end this life and move onto the next, though Harry wouldn't do that as long as Vader was still alive. She wasn't about to abandon her best buddy like that. But after he was gone they could easily move on and leave the zombies behind.

Harry got back into bed and turned off the lights, trying to get some sleep. Tomorrow she'd hit up a few more places to get some essential things and then come up with a plan on how to convince people she was speaking the truth when the very powerful elite would do everything in their power to convince the public she was full of shit.

Gasping, Harry sat up and switched the light back on.

She knew how to do it! She knew how to get around the global PR machine with its misinformation and accusations!

Grinning like a fool, Harry dropped back against her mattress, rubbing a startled Vader lying beside her over his head and back.

What was she this time around? A fucking writer.

All she had to do was get people to read about zombies. The whole point was, it didn't have to be real, what she wrote. If she could get people to read a fictional account of a zombie apocalypse, she could prepare them for the real thing that was happening under their noses, all the while skirting around the elite's propaganda machine desperate to bury the truth.

Harry wasn't going to tell anyone the truth, after all. She was merely going to write and sell fiction.

Turning the lights back off because she really needed to sleep, Harry considered the best zombie story she'd ever read in any life.

Easy. That was World War Z by Max Brooks. Hands down a masterpiece of fiction, based on real historical events from throughout humanity's existence, translated to fit a scenario featuring zombies.

Harry grabbed her phone and quickly checked that title and name. Just as she suspected. Neither the book nor the author existed in that world.

So, with a silent apology to Max Brooks, the next day Harry started writing World War Z as her own creation. She knew the book by heart pretty much, since it was one of her all-time favourites throughout many worlds, and whatever she couldn't remember she could make up on her own. She was a genuine writer, after all. She also decided to write down Max Brooks' other zombie book, the Zombie Survival Guide. And while she was writing those books, Harry thought that Max Brooks would probably be genuinely happy to know his works were being used to help people survive an actual zombie apocalypse somewhere in the multiverse.

In between writing, Harry hit up a gun store and after endless paperwork was able to take possession of a couple of Glocks. She also hit up a hardware store and bought four machetes, two sledgehammers and an axe. All of these were real, robust tools made to be used time and again. They made for the best kind of weapons to smack flesh-eating monsters in the head with.

Because guns were all well and good, but guns didn't kill zombies.

Bullets killed zombies.

And you needed to keep bullets in stock for your gun to be effective, and once shit hit the fan (and shit would hit the fan eventually), bullets would be the first thing to go out of stock, probably.

For that reason Harry also bought both a crossbow and a hand bow and plenty of arrows for both. She was proficient enough with both and could use them for killing zombies and for hunting game, and the arrows could be reused while bullets were gone once you fired them. She also invested in a couple of fishing poles with various kinds of artificial bait, and a small fishing net you could cast from the shore, so she could fish for food should the stores close down.

After two weeks of hunkering down in an RV park and writing around the clock, Harry had finished *World War Z* and sent it off to a freelance editor while she finished up the *Zombie Survival Guide*, which took another two weeks. She created simple, matching book covers and started promoting both books on social media. She created accounts for the books on all sorts of platforms, she filmed herself reading a few chapters of each book to put up as videos on a YouTube channel and the books' Facebook page, and once the editor was done, she sent off free copies to every book review blogger and vlogger she could find right after she published both books on any online platform that would have them, keeping the price low.

This wasn't about earning money. This was about getting as many people as she could to read both books so they would be prepared, all while keeping up the appearance she was just a writer selling her latest fictional novels.

And you could be sure Harry used the fact that she was a Staff Sergeant in the Marine Corps and a recipient of the Medal of Honour to its fullest extent while promoting the books. She was way too old for false modesty when she could use her very limited amount of fame to help save people's lives without anyone even realizing it.

All her efforts over the next few weeks were paying off and both books sold well enough to rise in the ranks and from there on the algorithms got hold of it and recommended it to more and more people. To help matters along Harry hosted an AMA (ask me anything) on Reddit, which was quite fun to do and very popular, and she bought some targeted ads on platforms like Facebook and Goodreads. She also created countless memes about her books that she posted on Tumblr, some of which went viral.

Harry posted a Q&A she shot by herself in her RV on the YouTube channel in which she talked at length about the scenarios in *World War Z*, using some of the answers she remembered hearing Max Brooks give while he talked about his books.

And then a few podcasts specializing in various topics, from the military to horror fanatics, wanted to talk to her about her new books and Harry agreed to all of them and spent hours yapping away about her experiences as a Marine and how best to prepare yourself for a zombie apocalypse.

Over the next month, both books sold many, many copies, even hitting the coveted number 1 spot of bestselling eBooks on the Amazon Kindle and the Apple store.

And all the while no one could call Harry a conspiracy theorist or an alarmist, because, after all, it was just fiction. It wasn't real. Look at the other books by the same author. Werewolf Marines. Fiction, all of it. So while the ruling elite continued their global PR campaign of ignorance and misinformation by calling anyone claiming zombies to be real a crackpot, Harry educated the public about zombies by insisting they were entirely fictional and to please read her fictional books about fictional zombies and how to survive them for real.

The only thing missing from this delicious victory was, of course, Tom. Harry was extraordinarily proud she'd come up with this plan all by herself. No matter how much Tom enjoyed pointing out Harry was a Gryffindor through and through (and he wasn't wrong about that, not really), Harry knew she could also pass for a very respectable Slytherin if she put some effort into it.

Case in point, her World War Z masterplan that was going off without a hitch.

Harry kept an eye on various conspiracy sites and was pleased to see people who claimed zombies were real, that they'd seen them, even personally destroyed them, were now recommending her books to anyone who would listen, and discussing the things recommended in her books at length. That led to Harry starting a Discord server for her books, so people had a place to talk and argue about completely fictional zombies as much as they wanted. It became quite popular quite quickly.

The thing was, save for Ted and Annette, Harry had yet to see another zombie and during some moments she started doubting her own brain again, if what she'd seen had been real at all.

Then Harry headed into Flagstaff, Arizona, to stock up on everything before heading off into the Coconino National Forest to boondock for a while. Harry's brain had made it clear it needed some peace and quiet after all the excitement of launching the zombie books and promoting the heck out of them.

Outside another Walmart (because apparently they were magnets for not only society's most trashy and colourful personalities, but also the walking dead), Harry came across three zombies attacking an older woman in her seat behind the wheel of her car through the opened car door, a younger man in the passenger seat desperately kicking against the zombies to get them off. Harry pulled her Glock from its holster on her lower back and rushed towards the car, aiming her gun at the nearest zombie's head and pulling the trigger.

Zombie number 1 went down without a hitch. Vader, who'd been barking furiously, obediently fell quiet and stayed behind her when she told him to shush and watch her back, and Harry took aim at zombie number 2 and dispatched it just as efficiently.

But zombie number 3 had all but crawled into the car, over the lifeless woman with a gaping wound in her throat and was making for the young man, grabbing hold of one of his legs before the man could kick the zombie again.

Harry leaned forward to look inside the vehicle and to take aim, and she met the man's brown eyes. A familiar shiver ran through Harry, while the man's eyes widened in shock.

Tom!

The zombie inside the car bit down on Tom's leg.

Harry froze, gun sitting uselessly in her hand, as the next few seconds seemed to last a few hours.

Tom got bitten by a zombie just as she'd found him. Tom was going to become a zombie and Harry would have to put him down like a rabid dog.

"For fuck's sake, Harry," Tom yelled, without any hint of fear or pain, jerking his leg away from the zombie as much as he could. "Snap out of it and shoot the fucking thing!"

What even? Harry, mostly on autopilot, raised her gun, took aim and pulled the trigger, hitting the zombie right in the top of his head and dispatching him instantly.

"Tom," Harry breathed, slowly stepping closer to car. "Tom, you got bit."

Tom grinned at her while pushing the motionless zombie away from himself, and then he rapped his knuckles against his calf. It sounded like metal. "Nah, it bit my prosthetic, courtesy of Uncle Sam."

And Harry cackled and briefly bent over while she descended into hysterical laughter. "Just the one?"

"Yeah, I lost a leg in Afghanistan. Roadside I.E.D. Are you making fun of my disability?" Tom asked, though he sounded more amused than anything else.

"Nope." Harry grabbed hold of her jeans and raised the legs just high enough to show off her own titanium. "It's just that I win, cause I got two."

Tom snorted. "Fuck's sake. It's not a competition."

"It is now," Harry insisted with a wide grin, but before Tom could reply, the dead woman in the driver's seat moaned, opening milky eyes. Harry quickly raised her Glock and shot the woman between the eyes.

"That's my mom," Tom said, face paling as he stared at the now really dead woman.

"Sorry," Harry mumbled, unsure what else to say.

A siren wailed behind them, quickly followed by, "Drop the gun! Step away from the vehicle with your hands in the air!"

For fuck's sake. Harry raised one hand in the air and carefully lowered her Glock to the asphalt with the other one. "Don't mention the zombies!" Harry whispered urgently to Tom while she straightened up, keeping both arms up in the air.

"Don't mention the zombies?" Tom repeated in utter confusion. "What is this? Fawltly Towers?"

“My name is Staff Sergeant Jasmine Broussard from the United States Marine Corps,” Harry called out while slowly walking backwards towards the cops behind her. “This is my service dog, Vader. I’m licensed to carry my gun. I came across three violent crackheads assaulting this family and I defended them.”

“It’s true,” Tom called, slowly getting out of the car, keeping his hands visible as well because he wasn’t stupid. “She saved my life.”

“Are you that Marine that got the medal of honour?” the cop behind her asked.

“The very same,” Harry said, glancing over her shoulder. Vader stood at her back, looking intently at the police officer but keeping his cool.

“Yeah, I saw you on Conan last year. I’m going to have to take you in for questioning. I won’t cuff you if you cooperate,” the cop said, lowering his weapon. It probably helped that the cop was black, too, thank fuck. Especially since Harry had her long, curly hair braided into four thick cornrows. On white people, those things were called Dutch braids, but if you were black, they were cornrows and to white people apparently signalled you were a violent gangbanger or some such nonsense. Harry liked them because they were a protective style that kept her hair out of her face whenever she boondocked and spent lots of time hiking, but she was well aware that small things like that could have a huge impact on how other, mostly white, people perceived you.

“I’ll cooperate,” Harry said, because there was little else she could do.

What followed was one free trip to the police station and a few hours of endless questions and statements and lots of waiting around. Since Harry was never placed under arrest, she didn’t bother contacting a lawyer. She was careful to always refer to the assailants as violent crackheads and never, ever even insinuate they were zombies. And Tom, who rode in the same police car as her to the station to give his statement, followed her lead without question, having quickly realized Harry knew something about the situation he didn’t.

Eventually the Chief of the Flagstaff Police department, a man of Hispanic descent, entered the interview room Harry was being kept in.

The police chief took a few minutes to observe Harry and Vader, who lay quietly at Harry’s feet. “Here’s what I don’t get,” the chief finally said. “You shot the violent crackheads to protect the Ruiz family. Then why put a bullet in Mrs Ruiz as well?”

Harry swallowed and stared the police chief right in the eyes. “They were contagious violent crackheads, Sir.”

A knowing smile came over the chief’s face and he nodded. “Yeah, we’ve been seeing a few of those around here lately. This crack epidemic might get out of hand sooner or later.”

Harry nodded solemnly. “Have your officers practice headshots. That takes care of crackheads just fine.”

“Good advice. You’re free to go, Sergeant Broussard.” The police chief turned around but stopped in the doorway to look at her over his shoulder. “Semper Fi.”

Harry grinned in return. It was always nice to meet a fellow Marine. “Thank you, Sir. Semper Fi.”

Tom was waiting for her in the entrance hall of the station. “I’m Raphael Ruiz,” he said, holding out a hand which Harry shook.

“Jasmine Broussard.” Harry followed Tom out of the station, while Tom fiddled with his phone to order them an Uber to take them back to the Walmart from whence they came. Tom was just over 6 feet tall, with a slightly muscular built, but not too much, with short black hair and brown eyes, and with quite handsome features. He was probably in his mid-twenties, like Harry was.

As they stood at the curb waiting for their ride, Tom turned towards Harry with an expression that could only be described as extremely fucking smug. “Did I mention that I’m a Corporal in the United States Navy Seals?”

Harry whipped her head around, staring up at Tom with blazing eyes. “You are not a Navy Seal! You’re a big fat liar.”

Tom’s grin was so wide it had to hurt him. “Well, darling, it’s all right that you’re only a marine. We can’t all be SEALs, after all.”

“You fucking fucktard,” Harry growled. “I ain’t got no penis this time and you know the SEALs don’t take women, the fucking old-fashioned bastards.” Harry’s cheeks were burning.

The reason for Harry’s rather emotional reaction was life # 44, in which Harry had been a Lakota Sioux who’d worked his butt off to become a Navy SEAL. After all, hell week was named that for a reason. And boy had Harry been proud of that fact, so much so that after he’d gotten blown up in Afghanistan and ended up in the Navy hospital where he met Tom and got his memories back, Harry had spent the rest of their life teasing Tom, a ‘mere’ Marine, that he didn’t have what it took to be a SEAL.

And now their roles were reversed and a fuming Harry knew she was in for a lifetime of teasing. Dammit. Why didn’t the SEALs take women already, bunch of backwater, brainless pigs that they were.

Tom stood basking in his unexpected glory, looking more satisfied than Harry had seen him in a very long time. “Don’t go blaming your non-existent penis, darling. The SEALs simply aren’t for everyone.”

“I hate you so much right now,” Harry muttered just as their Uber pulled up. The driver eyed Vader a little worriedly, but Harry kept Vader on the floorboard and made sure to offer the guy a good tip once he dropped them off by Harry’s RV.

“You’re full-timing?” Tom asked, eyes lighting up, clearly happy about this fact.

Harry unlocked the RV door and waved Tom inside. “Yeah, I got some very nice Disability Compensation, and I’ve started writing on the side.”

“I’m still duking it out with the VA,” Tom sighed, voice full of frustration familiar to anyone who’d ever dealt with the VA.

“You should hire my attorney. He got me set up within the year.” Harry sat down at the dinette after grabbing cans of soda for them both from the fridge.

Tom sat down opposite her. “I will.” Opening his can, Tom took a quick sip and then smiled at Harry. “I saw you on Colbert last year. Another shiny medal. Congrats.”

“Hey, even if I can’t remember it, I’m still a Gryffindor.” Harry took a few big gulps from her own can, thirsty as she was after hours of giving statements. “I got my memories back when I got shot, woke up in the hospital as Harry.”

“My mother,” Tom’s voice cracked for a moment and he cleared his throat once, twice. “My mother was my last immediate family. My father passed away in an industrial accident when I was just a kid, and my older brother joined the army and got blown up in Iraq.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, babe,” Harry said sincerely.

“Thanks. But what I’m saying is, I’ll happily join you on the road.” Tom gave Harry an intent look. “After you tell me what the deal is with the violent crackhead not-zombies.”

“Oh,” Harry said with a cackle. “You are going to love this.”

And after Harry had told Tom in detail about her discoveries of the ruling elite and their global PR campaign of disinformation, and Harry’s fictional answer to that, Tom cracked up and laughed for a full minute.

“I don’t say this often, darling,” Tom finally said, still chuckling. “But you are a genius.”

Harry beamed at him, chest warm and cheeks glowing. “Thanks, babe. I’m so glad I can finally share my devious plan with someone.”

“And what a devious plan it is.” Tom held up his can in a toast as he gave Harry an undeniably fond look. “Plagiarism and all.”

“Hey, I dedicated the books to ‘my friend Max who gave me the inspiration for these stories’,” Harry quickly said. There would always be a part of her that felt uncomfortable with claiming someone else’s story as her own, but needs must and all that. “Anyway, I’m starving and I saw a pizza place on the other side of the parking lot.”

Tom wrinkled his nose. “That pizza is —”

“Oh, fuck off,” Harry said with feeling, not in the mood for Tom’s usual food snobbery because she was getting seriously hangry. “I’m a black woman who’s just spent a whole fucking day at the police station hoping with all her might she wouldn’t be charged with first

degree murder and have to spend the night as well, so the least you can do is let me have some fucking American pizza because I am about to keel over from starvation.”

Tom blinked at her, looking for a moment as if he wasn't sure if he should get angry in return or not, because Tom took his pizza seriously, hungry Harry or not, but then he nodded his surrender and slowly got up. “Fine. Let's go have something that definitely isn't pizza.”

“Wow, how kind of you. Thank you,” Harry said with an enormous eyeroll and then stuck her tongue out at Tom before grabbing her phone and stepping out of the RV.

Just to needle Tom a bit more, Harry ordered a Hawaiian BBQ pizza with pineapple and enjoyed the heck out of Tom's disapproving expression. Tom ordered a simple pizza with pepperoni, mozzarella, olives, onions and mushrooms, but no matter how much he insisted it wasn't pizza, he still ate most of it. With leftovers enough for next day lunch, they returned to Harry's RV, where Tom barely let Harry tuck the pizza in the fridge before grabbing her wrist and pulling her closer.

“I'm going to kiss you now,” Tom said, eyes hooded as he looked from Harry's eyes to her lips and back. “And then I'm going to fuck you.”

“In a Walmart parking lot? And they say romance is dead,” Harry replied with a terribly amused grin.

“This is America, baby,” Tom whispered against her lips. “And there's nothing more American than a Walmart parking lot.” And then they were kissing, hands resting against shoulders and the side of their heads. It was always strange yet exciting to kiss for the first time in new bodies. On the one hand, it was new and slightly strange and took some getting used to again, but on the other hand it was unmistakably Tom she was kissing and that was comfortable and thrilling and filled with endless amounts of love.

Harry pulled back once she felt Tom harden in his jeans, pressed against her stomach. “Let's keep this between just us, babe.” With a wink, Harry hurried around the RV, closing all the little curtains and blinds while Tom locked the door and toed off his shoes.

The bed in the back corner was small but a standard feature for the kind of RV she had, and Harry knew they'd make it work since they'd travelled in a number of different RVs together many times before.

Then they started peeling off each other's clothes and Harry didn't feel at all self-conscious about her prosthetics or her stumps. Not just because Tom had one of those as well. Even if Tom would have had two intact legs, Harry wouldn't have worried. They'd had so many different bodies over their lives by that point that she knew Tom would accept her no matter what she looked like. Tall or short, thin or fat, bearded or balding, white skin or brown, with plain features or ones that might get you a modelling job. It didn't matter to them in the end.

So missing legs? Not a problem, not for either of them. Their bodies were just that...bodies, that inevitably changed over the years as they aged, and were replaced with brand new ones every time they were reborn.

“Nice,” Harry said once she saw Tom’s prosthetic. Tom’s leg was missing from above the knee and Harry ran a few fingers down the metal knee joint. “Is it easy to use?”

“Took some getting used to, but now it feels completely normal,” Tom said as he pressed kisses down Harry’s throat and onto her shoulder. “Do you have condoms? Because I don’t have any on me.”

“No need,” Harry said with a little sigh and gestured towards the scars running across her belly. “Lost my uterus, so no babies, and I got tested since I last got laid, which was years ago, so I’m clean.”

“I’m sorry.” Tom pressed a warm hand against Harry’s belly. “But given the circumstances, with a zombie apocalypse looming on the horizon, it might be for the best.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed quietly. She enjoyed having children, generally, but she wouldn’t choose to have them in their current situation. And at that point they’d had kids together so many times already that skipping one or two lives didn’t hurt them in any significant ways.

Tom used his mouth and fingers to get her ready and to learn her new body, and he had her coming in no time. While Harry rode out the warm waves of pleasure, Tom lined up his cock and pushed inside her, prolonging Harry’s orgasm with his first few thrusts.

“Missed you,” Harry moaned in his ear, one arm wrapped around his shoulders as she met the sharp stabs of his hips with her own. “Love you.”

“Love you too, darling,” Tom said before releasing a deep groan.

Harry loved the feeling of Tom’s cock slamming deep inside of her. There was something so delicious and right about having a part of Tom’s body sliding so thoroughly inside her own. It was a physical representation of their souls, perhaps, how they were connected on levels they could barely understand.

Tom reached between them with one hand and rubbed his fingers across Harry’s clit in time with this thrusts and before long Harry was coming again with a cry she muffled against Tom’s shoulder. Tom followed her over the edge only moments later, face buried in her neck.

Later, as they lay cuddling while their bodies were spent, Harry said, “You know, isn’t it weird that we’re always in professions that match?”

“Hm?” Tom turned his face to look at her, one eyebrow curved in a silent question.

“I mean, we’re both military this life, like we were back in number 44 as well. It can’t be random. If everything was really random, I’d be in the USA military and you’d be a construction worker in Malaysia or something. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, whatever lives we’re given to live do always seem engineered to assure we meet sooner rather than later,” Tom said quietly.

“Exactly. So who’s pulling the strings?”

“No clue.” Tom nuzzled Harry’s cheek. “And a zombie apocalypse isn’t the ideal life to try to find out.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Harry sighed, her hand finding Tom’s and her fingers hooking around a few of his. “It’s gonna get a lot worse before it’s getting better, this apocalypse.”

“It’s only just started,” Tom agreed. “I have to arrange my mother’s funeral, sell the house, but then we can leave here.”

“Just travel around, spread the fictional word about the upcoming apocalypse and kill any zombies we encounter,” Harry suggested, turning her face towards Tom’s, so she could kiss the tip of his nose. “It is a unique opportunity, though, isn’t it? Living through a real zombie apocalypse.”

Tom remained in quiet thought for a moment before nodding once. “It is something we haven’t done before, that’s for sure.”

“Yep, at least this life isn’t boring.” Harry closed her eyes and listened to Tom’s breathing until she fell asleep. Tomorrow was another day, and now that Tom was by her side, Harry looked forward to kicking lots of zombie ass for a long time to come.

Life # 35: That time Harry and Tom were vampire slayers, part 1

Chapter Summary

Life # 35: That time Harry and Tom were vampire slayers, part 1

Chapter Notes

This life is going to be told in a few parts, since it's so long. I'm not going to rehash much of what we've seen on the show, but instead focus on the differences from canon. Next part we'll meet Tom.

Thanks for reading and commenting. Your support means the world to me.

Life # 35: That time Harry and Tom were vampire slayers

Sunnydale, California, 1997.

Harry woke up with Xander hovering over her after she'd just drowned in a puddle. Well, after the Master had her for a midnight snack, that was.

For a few long moments, Harry stared up at nothing, horribly disoriented and filled with grief. In their previous life, number 34, Harry, male and Tom, female, had been openly opposing the cultural revolution in 1970s China where they'd been born, trying to get others to see that Mao's goal of purging all traditional and capitalist elements from Chinese society was harmful and not in China's best interest. They'd paid for that with their lives after a brief stint in prison as traitors to the communist nation. The grief Harry felt came from their two small children she'd now lost. But she knew her parents would look after them, so that was a small comfort. A very small comfort.

"Buffy?" Xander asked, and it snapped Harry back to the here and now.

Right. She was a vampire slayer and there was a vampire that needed slaying.

Work first, existential crisis later.

As Harry got to her feet, Angel had the audacity to call her weak.

"No," Harry said, ignoring the lightness in her head. "No, I feel strong." And she did. She had 34 lifetimes worth of memories now, plus she was a slayer. Not to mention the magic she could feel all around her. This world had lots and lots of magic and Harry was determined to

learn to control it. “I feel different,” Harry added, just to signal that there might be something different about her, so her friends wouldn’t freak out when inevitably she’d act in new and exciting ways around them now that she remembered all her previous lives. “Let’s go.”

Kill vampire first, then worry about what happened to Tom.

Ugh. Harry hated having her memories back before she met her soulmate. This was now the second time that had happened. The first time being life # 21, when a sudden soy allergy had sent Harry into full-blown anaphylactic shock and cardiac arrest and when she woke up in the hospital days later she had all her memories but no soulmate, and she’d freaked out about it for the years it took to finally run into Tom. A few lives after that, Tom had gotten his memories back early after he’d accidentally electrocuted himself as a young teen while helping his dad remodel the garage, causing his heart to stop until his panicked father had gotten it going again with CPR. It had taken Tom five years until he finally met Harry that time, so Harry knew she might be in for a bit of a wait.

But at least now she was quite sure that this was just a normal part of their endless reincarnation deal. When one of them died prematurely and was resuscitated, it always led to getting their memories back before their soulmate did, plain and simple.

Harry took care of the Master, pulling up Occlumency shields to protect herself against the Master’s mental powers of persuasion, and dumping him down from the roof into the library onto a convenient piece of wood.

Afterwards, as they all headed to the Bronze to celebrate their victory, Angel sidled up to her and Harry had to repress a few shivers.

What the fuck even?

What the fuck was a two-hundred year old guy doing pretty much stalking a sixteen-year-old girl?

Harry’s inner adult (not to mention her inner parent and her inner police officer, because what the fuck?) found Angel’s behaviour more than a little disturbing and she ignored him as best she could while staying close to Willow and Xander, privately lamenting what a naïve little girl she’d been before she got her memories back. The guy had spent months lying to her for a start, and Harry knew from bitter, personal experience that starting relationships with people who thought it perfectly fine to lie about huge issues like ‘oh, yeah, I’m a fucking vampire’ never did end well.

Man, she was getting too old for this shit. Having lived for thirty-four lifetimes meant she was around 2000 years old, after all.

That night, as she crawled into bed, exhausted, she shed a few tears for her children and her family she’d left behind in her previous life. And also for Tom, because she missed him so fucking much. They knew when they started opposing the Chinese regime they were risking their lives, but it still hurt to have those lives cut short the way they’d been.

Maybe it was time to stop being an idealistic rebel in the lives they were forced to live in countries and regimes that they didn't agree with. It never ended well, after all. Tom, as an activist trying to save the rainforest in Brazil ended up murdered before she was thirty. When Tom tried to help Harry and family escape Stalin's Russia, they were caught and executed on the spot. And only a few lives after that they'd been members of the Masai tribe in Kenia in the 1800s, where they'd opposed Britain's colonial rule through the East Africa Protectorate, which had gotten them hanged on some bogus charges.

Yeah, maybe it was time to just accept whatever regime they happened to be reincarnated in, or at the very least keep any revolutionary actions on the downlow from then on.

Harry feared she might be too much of a Gryffindor to ever stop opposing injustice completely, but she could perhaps at least be a bit smarter about it. As for the Gryffindor part, yeah, that she was, down to her soul, apparently. Case in point, that day she's walked to her certain death because there was a prophecy looming over her about a bad guy hurting her friends that needed to be stopped once and for all.

Sound familiar?

Yeah, been there, done that. Harry inwardly snorted and shifted around in bed until she was comfortable, closing her eyes determinedly, yet sleep was still a long time to come.

The next morning, Harry took a long shower, got dressed in a cute little pink dress, just because she enjoyed being a woman again and could spruce herself up a little without anyone batting an eye. She did her hair in a few fanciful braids, took her time applying make-up and then went downstairs to have breakfast with her mom.

Joyce was a nice woman, who tried hard to be a good mom, and while she was far from perfect, Harry was still happy enough to have her for her immediate family.

"Your father called," Joyce said after she finished her toast. "He's picking you up Monday next week, first thing in the morning."

Ah. Yeah. She was spending the summer in Los Angeles with her father. While Harry loved her father, the man was a little wishy washy when it came to childcare ever since her parents' divorce. But spending a few months in LA did give her the opportunity to start making some money. She knew Joyce worked hard, but living in California was expensive and they didn't have a lot of money to spend.

It never occurred to Harry to tell Joyce even one little thing about her new and improved memories. After all, that one time last year when she'd told her parents about her being a vampire slayer, they'd sent her to a mental institution. So yeah, Joyce would remain blissfully ignorant.

Then there were Harry's friends, Willow and Xander. Who were kids. Who shouldn't have been involved in this vampire slaying mess in the first place but it was too late now to change that. The least Harry could do was not inflict her own mental anguish about being reincarnated time and again onto them.

Of course, there was also Giles, her Watcher. While Harry had a few choice words to say to anyone of the Council, should she ever meet them, about basically forcing teenage girls to systematically kill themselves while fighting demons, Giles was a good man at heart.

Harry loved him like a mentor, a friend, and even perhaps like a father figure.

And Harry was sure Giles would listen to her, accept her new self, 34 previous lives and all. So yeah, Giles had potential, but Harry also realized she wasn't in a hurry. She could enjoy a summer in Los Angeles before making any decisions.

The next week, Buffy went to school and spent time with her friends, who were getting increasingly excited as the last day of classes neared.

"You seem quiet," Willow said during lunch on their very last school day.

Harry shrugged and offered Willow a small smile. "I guess I really need a vacation."

"Don't we all," Xander said with a dramatic spread of his arms. "This time last year vampires didn't even exist. Or, you know, we didn't know they did, and now look at us."

"Yeah," Willow sighed and then ducked her head. "We'll miss you, though, Buffy."

"I'll miss you, too. Both of you," Harry said honestly. She really loved Willow and Xander. They were great friends, and for some reason, reminded her of Hermione and Ron, or what she remembered of them, anyway.

And then there was Angel, who was still stalking her and finally crawled up to her bedroom window the evening before Harry would leave for LA.

"You've been avoiding me," Angel said, heavy brow furrowed.

"Look, Angel," Harry said with a sigh. She always hated breaking up with people, but there was no way she was continuing this sham of a relationship or whatever it was. Even if she didn't have a reunion with Tom to look forward to sometime in the future, she still wouldn't continue it. There was just something about it that rubbed her entirely the wrong way. "This is not going to work."

"What?" Angel seemed genuinely taken aback.

"I'm happy to be your friend, I really am, but I don't want to be in a relationship with you," Harry said, not mincing any words. "So, whatever there was between us, it now ends."

"Buffy," Angel said, looking like he was about to argue, or perhaps mansplain their relationship or something.

"No means no, Angel." Harry crossed her arms, putting on her resolve face. "Don't make me stake you."

"All right." Angel held up his hands in surrender. "We'll talk when you get back from LA." And with that, he jumped off the roof and disappeared into the night.

“Ugh. That is not what I said. We’re over,” Harry called after him, keeping her voice soft but knowing he would hear her what with his super senses. “Learn to take a clue.”

Once Harry’s father came to pick her up, Harry had something of a plan to make some money on the side and hopefully make her and Joyce’s lives a little easier.

“Daddy,” Harry said once they were on their way to LA. “I’ve been taking driving lessons.” Which was a big fat lie, but Harry was an experienced driver now that she had her memories back.

“You want a car?” Harry’s dad asked with a knowing smile.

“Well, first I want to take my driving test and get my license, but I’m ready for that, promise,” Harry rattled on, giving her father a hopeful look. “But after that, yeah, a small, cute little car. It doesn’t have to be new. I can learn to look after it myself and everything. I’ve gotten really good at doing chores and stuff now that it’s just Mom and me living in a house by ourselves.” And cue the slightly manipulative tactic of making her father feel guilty about running out on his wife and daughter.

It worked like a charm, though.

“Sure, pumpkin,” her Dad said, eyes a little misty. “We’ll get you a cute little car.”

“Awesome,” Harry said, glad part one of her plan was off to a good start. “Oh, and could I also get a laptop computer?”

As it turned out, Harry was really good at making her father feel guilty enough to give her all she wanted, and within the week Harry had her driver’s license and a cute little canary yellow Volkswagen Beetle convertible. It was a few years old and a little beat up, but Harry, as promised, spent time fixing it up inside and out, making it seem to her father that she’d taken some special automotive classes at school.

And she also got a laptop, which she desperately needed for her plans to work.

See, since it was 1997, eBay had already been invented, and as it turned out, Harry at that point was an experienced reseller, having spent a few lives already reselling things on eBay as a part-time income. It was fun, kind of like a treasure hunt, to find items to sell, and it could earn you a nice little side income.

Especially since it was still early days for eBay commerce, and not everyone and their grandmother and their dog were pillaging and plundering every thrift store they could find to sell every little worthless piece of crap on the internet for a dollar’s worth of profit like they would be in a few short years, ruining the market.

No, these were the golden days, still, for buying used clothing, shoes and other items at thrift stores and selling them online for really nice profits.

And that was how Harry spent her two months on LA. Her father had a few days off, and they went to Disneyland (always fun), did some window shopping in Beverly Hills, and spent

a day at the beach. The rest of the time, when her father had to work, Harry drove around in her yellow Beetle, visiting Goodwill after Goodwill, stocking up on dollar items which she could easily resell for twenty or thirty dollars or more. She had a good eye for name brand items, but also for obscure porcelain dinner ware or what kind of books would make money, seeing as she'd all learned that already in different lives.

It kind of felt like cheating, but Harry didn't care. By the end of her vacation she had a nice little business going, which she could easily continue in Sunnydale, especially since she wouldn't have to spend much time on homework from now on.

She'd been through high school, or its equivalent in other countries, so often by now that she knew all those subjects by heart, and was fluent in languages like French, German and Spanish, so she could ace those classes without any effort. She even spoke fluent Japanese and Mandarin Chinese, and she was sure to pick those elective classes as well so she could earn some As.

Anyway, school was in the bag, so any time Harry wasn't staking vampires, she could explore the local thrift stores for resalable goods, and maybe do a little bit of dumpster diving for things to sell. She did spend a lot of time in dark alleyways full of dumpsters, after all.

While in LA, Harry hadn't done any active hunting for the undead, but whenever she came across a vampire or a demon running amok, usually while she was shopping thrift stores after dark, she took care of them without any problems, so she did keep herself sharp and in shape.

Harry drove herself home in her Beetle, roof down, wind whipping through her hair, trunk and backseat filled with bags and boxes of stuff she had listed on eBay.

"Buffy." Her mom's mouth dropped open as Harry showed off her little Beetle she'd parked on the street in front of their house. "A car is expensive."

"Ah." Harry quickly held up her hand to stave her mother off. "You are looking at CEO Buffy, Mom. I've started an eBay company and I'm earning my own money from now on. I'm paying for my car and everything else I need, promise."

"That's..." Joyce placed a hand on her throat, rubbing her own chest slowly. "I'm proud of you, Buffy, but school is important."

"I promise, if my grades suffer, I'll quit. But they won't." Harry gave her mom a bright smile, already sure her grades would be going up that year instead of down.

After a welcome home dinner of takeout Chinese with her mom, Harry took her car to pick up Willow and to then drive to Xander's home.

"This is so cool," Willow said, bouncing in the passenger's seat. "And it's so cute. I never thought a car could be cute, but this one is."

"My God, Buffy," Xander said, staring at her car in awe. "You've got yourself a Slayer Mobile."

Harry cracked up, she couldn't help it. "Yeah, that shall now be the name of my Beetle. The Slayer Mobile."

"To the Slayer Mobile!" Xander yelled as he hopped into the backseat.

"To the ice cream!" Harry yelled in reply, since she hadn't had dessert yet and was craving something sweet. So a trip to their favourite ice cream parlour it was.

That night Harry woke up with a start and looked around her bedroom in alarm.

"Can I come in?" Angel asked, standing inside her bedroom in front of her open window.

"What the fuck?" Harry jumped out of bed and socked Angel in the nose. "You do not enter a girl's bedroom uninvited. You're almost two and a half centuries old and I'm only sixteen and this makes you look like a giant cradle robber."

Angel stood rubbing his face. "Sorry. I just thought – "

"I broke up with you, Angel." Harry crossed her arms. "I'd like for us to be friends, if you can keep your distance and respect my boundaries. But if you don't, I will punch you again."

"I don't understand your sudden change of mind," Angel muttered, giving Harry a confused look.

Sighing, Harry sat down on the edge of her bed. "I don't know what else to tell you other than that I'm just not interested in you anymore. Since I died, I got a new perspective on life and my priorities have changed, I guess. I want to put my time and energy into things that will be useful now and in the future instead of a relationship that's doomed from the start."

"Well," Angel said, looking slightly taken aback. "That's...honest, I guess. Is that why you're suddenly surrounded by boxes?"

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, that's the merchandise. I've started reselling things on eBay to earn some extra cash."

"Ah." Angel nodded, turning to climb back out of the window. "You really have changed," he whispered and then he was gone.

"You've got no idea, pall." Shaking her head, Harry got up to close the window. She really needed to learn how to uninvite vampires from your home, because this was ridiculous, a guy showing up in her bedroom in the middle of the night like that.

Then there was the Anointed One, who tried to resurrect the Master, because of course that was a thing, and Harry got to work off a little steam smashing the Master's bones to dust, before she swiped them all up, bagged them, drove her Slayer Mobile to the nearest beach and dumped the bone dust into the ocean.

Then there was a dude and his BFF who Frankensteined the dude's brother, and Harry got to ride to Cordelia's rescue in her Slayer Mobile.

After that Harry decided to come clean to Giles, because she'd noticed him eyeing her suspiciously more than once since her return from LA. Harry did her best to act not too differently than before, but just the fact that she was now driving her own car and running her own little side business while simultaneously improving her grades was apparently reason for concern.

Since this required privacy, Harry went to visit Giles in his apartment on a Sunday afternoon.

"Buffy?" Giles looked genuinely surprised to find Harry standing on his doorstep. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, but there's something I have to tell you," Harry said, accepting Giles' inviting gesture of his hand and stepping over the threshold. "It's quite the story. Maybe make some tea to keep me hydrated?"

"Certainly." Giles seemed to take Harry's strange requests in stride and got the kettle going while placing teabags in two mugs.

"Before I explain anything, I need one favour," Harry said as she watched Giles work. "You can't share any of what I'm about to tell you with anyone, including the Watcher's Council. Especially not them."

"Does this have anything to do with Angel?" Giles asked while he poured boiling water in the mugs. "Because I haven't mentioned your relationship with him in my reports to the Council, I assure you."

Harry waved that comment away. "I broke up with Angel before I left for LA, Giles. Do keep up."

"Oh. Uh. Well, in that case, I suppose I can keep this conversation confidential." Giles carried both mugs to the living room where they sat down on the couch.

"This is going to sound strange, or even unbelievable, but I ask that you just listen." Harry picked up her mug and cradled it between her hands. Holding a steaming mug of tea was a comforting thing, and Harry needed that little bit of comfort right then because sharing the truth about her unique situation was kinda nerve wracking.

Giles' expression was downright concerned at that point. "What is it you want to say?"

"When I died, when Xander performed CPR and brought me back, I regained my memories of my previous 34 lives." Harry paused for a moment to let that sink in, but all Giles did in response was slightly raise both eyebrows. "It's like this...life number one my soulmate and myself got involved in some unknown magic that made it so we're stuck in this endless cycle of reincarnation. Every time we die, we wake up in a new life and a new body the moment we meet each other, and look in the others' eyes. The only exception to that is if one of us dies and gets resuscitated, we get our memories back early if that happens."

"Your soulmate?" Giles asked, removing his glasses and rubbing a hand across his eyes.

“Tom. My soulmate’s name is Tom.” Harry grinned at Giles. “And my name is Harry, just so you know, but I also answer to Buffy, obviously.”

“Harry? Are you a man?”

“In my first life, yes, but souls are genderless as it turns out.” Harry shrugged. She’d been reborn as both men and women so often by now that it wasn’t something out of the ordinary for her anymore. “So while I used to be a man, right now I am very much a young woman and happy about that.”

“All right.” Giles sipped his tea and slid his glasses back on. “This is quite extraordinary. Have you been a slayer before?”

“Nope. First time with the demon hunting, though Tom and I were monster hunters in Victorian London during life number 14. But we didn’t have powers then, we were just concerned citizens. And the vampires in that world were different than the ones in this world.”

“Victorian London? How does that even work?” For the first time since Harry started her story, Giles sounded like he had trouble believing her.

“I don’t know, Giles. Tom and I have speculated on our rebirths for years and years and we’ve never reached any solid conclusion.” Harry briefly bit her lip, suddenly tired to the bone at the idea of all the lives they’d lived and all the lives they’d undoubtedly be living in the future. “I don’t know how it works, but we are reincarnated again and again across time and the multiverse. Some worlds have no supernatural elements or magic at all, and other worlds, like this one, are brimming with it.”

“Fascinating, though simultaneously quite hard to believe.” Giles looked at Harry with a rather apologetic smile.

“I get that, Giles, I really do. Now tell me how I suddenly know how to fluently speak Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Swedish, Hindi, Swahili, Norwegian, Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese, and the list goes on.” Harry stared at Giles with no small amount of defiance. “I’m also suddenly able to drive a car without any problems without taking a single driving lesson and I know my way around the internet and am able to code in my sleep while before I kicked the bucket I barely knew how to turn on a computer.”

“Yes, I have of course noticed changes in your behaviour,” Giles said while he looked down at the mug of tea in his hand. “I had thought perhaps facing your own mortality had motivated you to try harder at certain aspects of your life.”

“That doesn’t explain why I’m suddenly a hundred degrees more mature than my friends,” Harry calmly pointed out. “I know it’s hard to believe, but Giles, please believe me.”

“And what about this soulmate that you mentioned,” Giles asked, seeming to accept what Harry had told him, at least for now.

“I’ll meet Tom sooner or later, but there’s no telling when that’s going to happen. And he, or she, could be anyone.” Harry swallowed, missing Tom more than anything at that moment. “A new student at school, some random person I run into at the supermarket. Really, the possibilities are endless.”

“Am I to assume that you have lived full lives with this soulmate?” Giles asked rather delicately, and Harry realized Giles seemed a bit flustered with where the conversation was going.

Grinning, Harry leaned back in the couch and sipped her tea, drawing the moment out a bit because seeing Giles like that was hilarious. “Yes, Giles, I’ve been married to my soulmate, and a few other people. We’ve had many children together, and none of those were ever delivered by a stork. We made them the old-fashioned way.”

“Yes, thank you.” Giles pulled his glasses off again, cheeks definitely a little rosier than before. “I confess it is strange to think of you as an adult who has lived complete lives when I’ve only known you as a teenage girl still developing in many ways.”

“Yeah, I get that. But I’m around 2000 years old, when it comes down to it, Giles. I’ve seen it all at this point.” Harry finished her tea while Giles seemed to mull that over.

“I cannot begin to imagine what that must be like, to live that long.” Giles placed his empty mug on the coffee table and turned a little to look at Harry. “If you want I can research this phenomenon, see if there perhaps are records of others in a situation similar to yours.”

“I would definitely appreciate that.” Suddenly, Harry remembered something. “Oh, and if you could fix me up with a magical way to uninvite vampires from your home, I’d appreciate that very much.”

“Is Angel giving you trouble?” Giles asked with a concerned frown.

“Nah, I can handle him. He just has a tendency to visit me inside my bedroom when I’m asleep and I’m not having any of that.” Harry shuddered. “My teenage self thought the whole thing mysterious and romantic. But older than dirt me just finds the idea of a 200-year-old guy lusting after a 16-year-old girl creepy as hell. Adult men who are attracted to teenagers are usually very immature, so people their own age aren’t attractive to them, but teenagers, who are still immature because they’re young and inexperienced, are.”

Giles blinked. “I hadn’t thought about it like that before.”

“It took me a few lifetimes as well to figure that out, but we’ve had teenaged kids who got involved with older people and saw how that dynamic worked first-hand. And it never lasts, because inevitably the teenagers grow up and mature and realize there’s something wrong in the relationship.” Harry had even dated an older guy herself in one life, before meeting Tom and getting her memories back. She knew first-hand how special she’d felt at first, to be chosen by an adult while she was barely sixteen. And then she’d gotten older and realized that man was an immature, controlling douchebag who was never going to grow up, and she’d broken up with him post-haste. But she wasn’t comfortable to share such details about her lives, at least not yet.

“You truly have changed,” Giles said with a smile. “I’ll get you that ritual and research your situation.”

“Thanks, Giles. I really appreciate it.”

And that was the start of a beautiful friendship, which seemed kind of silly, since Giles was her Watcher and had been for a year already, but from that moment on, especially when they were alone together, Giles started treating her much more like an equal instead of like a student. And as much as Harry enjoyed spending time with Willow and Xander, it was also really nice to have an adult friend to talk to, someone who knew who she really was.

As time went by, they turned their Sunday afternoon meetings into a weekly thing, always with tea and occasionally with some pastries or pie if Harry had been baking that week. Harry had convinced her mom she’d spent a lot of time in LA watching the Food Network and that’s why she could suddenly cook and bake like there was no tomorrow. And Joyce, who was no great cook herself and worked long hours at the gallery, eventually appreciated Harry’s efforts in the kitchen since their diets improved by leaps and bounds, as Harry preferred cooking delicious meals with fresh ingredients.

Things happened. Spike and Drusilla came to town, Xander dated a mummy girl, Willow met a quiet fellow named Oz, Harry met another slayer named Kendra, Joyce dated a robot and much, much more. All the while, Harry continued her eBay business, which earned her up to a thousand dollars a month, the majority of which she put in a savings account, and her grades improved by leaps and bounds because she knew most of the material inside and out.

And during their weekly meetings Harry felt more and more comfortable to share details about her past lives with Giles, who eventually returned the favour after Ethan Rayne came to town and some of Giles’ more adventurous past was revealed.

And then Jenny decided to cast a spell to anker Angel’s soul in his body, for reasons that weren’t clear to Harry, but she messed up and Angel lost his soul.

And Harry was suddenly extremely happy she’d performed the ritual to uninvite a vampire, because Angelus did not take rejection as well as Angel did, as it turned out.

Life # 35: That time Harry and Tom were vampire slayers, part 2

Chapter Summary

Life # 35: That time Harry and Tom were vampire slayers, part 2

Chapter Notes

Yes, there will be a part 3, and part 4, and probably part 5, too. We'll see how far we get in Buffy canon.

Thanks for reading, everyone! Your support and comments keep me writing.

Life # 35: That time Harry and Tom were vampire slayers, part 2

After they dealt with the Judge with a rocket launcher, which was awesome, if Harry did say so herself, and Xander was amazing for having come up with that genius plan, Harry invited Jenny over to Giles' apartment for a little chat.

"You're saying your uncle gave you this ritual?" Harry asked, her hand on Jenny's throat. She wasn't pulling any punches, no matter Giles' quiet objections, because one of her friends had been hurt. For all that Angel had acted like a creepy stalker for a while, after Harry had made it clear she was done with him, Angel had respected her wishes and kept his distance, though still helping them with all the supernatural trouble that always came their way in Sunnydale. So Harry considered him a friend, and now Jenny had made Angel's soul go poof and turned him into a homicidal maniac overnight.

"My uncle Enyos told me Angel's soul was in danger because the original curse was deteriorating. He gave me the anchoring ritual, but instead of fixing the issue it caused him to lose his soul," Jenny said in a tight voice, Harry's fingers partially blocking her airways.

"So he set you up," Harry concluded with a sage nod.

"I'm so sorry," Jenny breathed, eyes wide and pleading. "I was only trying to help, I swear it."

"I believe you," Harry said with a sigh, releasing Jenny's throat. Giles stepped forward at once to check up on her.

“My clan were the ones to initially curse Angelus,” Jenny explained later, after Giles had made them all cups of tea and they were sitting around Giles’ living room. “Throughout the generations we’ve always kept an eye on him, to make sure he kept suffering and for a century he did. But then he changed, started taking part in life again, all because of you, Buffy. I was sent here to make sure he wouldn’t find happiness, that our clan’s vengeance would continue.”

“Let me guess,” Harry said before taking a sip of her tea. “Angel’s life got too comfortable, so your clan decided to do away with him entirely. And to accomplish that they tricked you into disappearing his soul so I would end up staking him.”

“That does make a disturbing amount of sense,” Giles said, giving Jenny a dubious look. “I wish you’d told us about this sooner, Jenny.”

“I didn’t think I had to,” Jenny whispered while looking down at her lap. “I thought I could serve both my clan and help you protect Sunnydale.”

“Well, what’s done is done,” Harry said, not wanting to waste any time on what might have been. “Your clan cursed Angel with a soul once. Let’s do it again.”

“The ritual was lost, as far as I know,” Jenny said, though she looked interested in Harry’s proposal.

Harry leaned forward, giving Jenny a hard look. “So find it. Do whatever it takes. Angel is a friend and I don’t want to kill him. I will if I have to, but I much prefer to just ram his soul back into him and turn him into a real boy again instead of the demon he is now.”

A few days later, Willow kept shooting Harry questioning looks while they were studying together in Harry’s bedroom. Well, Willow was studying. Harry was going through some Adidas shirts she’d found in the local thrift store that afternoon, photographing them before listing them on eBay.

“Wills, I can hear your brain churning from over here,” Harry eventually said, looking up at Willow with a smile. “What is it?”

“Aren’t you... I don’t know...heartbroken about Angel?” Willow finally asked, cheeks flaming.

“I broke up with him, remember?” Harry reminded her while resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

Willow’s whole face did some very complicated things. “I know, but still...you made smoochies with him. That didn’t mean anything to you?”

Harry sighed. Ah, to be a teenager again and to think that just because you kissed someone once or twice it was true love or some such rot. “Angel is my friend, but he’s nothing more than that. I want him to get better, and we’re working on that, but that’s all there is to it.”

“Okay,” Willow said in a small voice, still so young and inexperienced that Harry realized she couldn’t understand Harry’s position, not for a few years at least, until she got a little older and wiser.

A week later it was the full moon and Oz turned out to be a werewolf, because why not? Nothing could surprise Harry at that point, she was sure. And that proved to be true a week or two after that when Xander and Cordelia had a little spat and Xander bribed a witch for a love spell and Harry got turned into a rat.

Ugh. That was just what she needed, one of her friends thinking magic would solve every single one of their petty problems (spoiler: it didn’t). Harry had taken to studying the magic available in that world with the help of Giles, but she’d soon realized that the magic available was all ritual based and quite time consuming and thus couldn’t be used while actively slaying. Harry now had a reasonable theoretical understanding of magic but rarely cast anything, other than a few simple spells she and Giles had tried out together, just so Harry could get a feel for the magic around them.

Later, after Harry was a girl again and everything was put to rights and Cordelia finally learned there were more important things in life than pleasing her useless friends, Harry grabbed Xander’s arm and dragged him into an empty classroom.

“Xander, you’re my friend and I love you,” Harry said while Xander stared at her in confusion. “But if you ever dare cast, or have someone cast, anything resembling a love spell again, I will cut off your dick and feed it to you, do you understand?”

“What? Why?” Xander paled and stepped away from Harry.

“Love spells are the magical equivalent to date rape drugs,” Harry said, crossing her arms. She hated any type of love spells or potions and anything that took away a person’s free will, just because someone else couldn’t take no for an answer. “I don’t care how butt hurt you feel because Cordelia got her panties in a twist, you do not ever, EVER, try to take away her free will again, understood?”

“Yeah,” Xander said in a trembling voice. “I hadn’t looked at it like that. It won’t happen again. Pinkie swear.” And even though his hand shook a little, Xander held up his pinkie. Harry knew without a doubt if Xander would ever attend Hogwarts, he’d get sorted into Gryffindor in record time. Willow would go straight to Ravenclaw, of course.

Harry hooked her own pinkie around Xander’s. “Pinkie swear accepted.”

Ah, teenagers and their inability to realize there were consequences to their actions. And sixteen-year-old boys were generally not known for their critical thinking and decision making skills. Harry would cut Xander some slack, hoping her little talk put the fear of the slayer into him and he’d think twice before resorting to witchcraft to solve his personal issues from now on.

Meanwhile, Angel was laying low but still made his presence known through some very disturbing attempts at wooing Harry. She regularly got drawings in the mail, or chocolates and roses, or little notes proclaiming Angel was the only one allowed to kill her and other

romantic gestures like that. Also, dead people showed up all over the place and that didn't sit well with Harry.

"I want to help Angel, I really do," Harry said to Giles during their weekly Sunday afternoon chat. "But at the same time, I also realize Angel is not more important than any of the people he's killing. He got Theresa the other day, turned her into a vampire. She was just an innocent high school student. She had just as much right to live a long, happy life than anyone else."

"Yes, I agree this poses a bit of a dilemma," Giles agreed while folding his hands in his lap in a solemn gesture. "However, Angel with his soul restored is a powerful force for good and can ultimately save many lives in the future."

"Yeah, that's true, but tell that to Theresa," Harry said with a deep sigh.

Of course, that whole discussion soon became a moot point because Angel murdered Jenny and Harry was just done.

There were limits to the kind of bullshit Harry was willing to put up with, and her friends being murdered was very much crossing that line.

Of course, Harry had to save Giles' ass first, since he'd gone off his rocker completely and tried to kill Angel by himself and yeah, that plan was doomed from the start. But Harry all but shoved Giles out the factory door and then went after Angel with everything she got.

And she got a lot, much more than Angel ever realized.

Harry had brought her katana, which she'd recently purchased from an antiquarian in LA. A genuine Japanese sword, made to be used, not one of those cheap knock-offs that were meant to only be put up on a wall for display.

No, this katana was hand-crafted and sharp enough to cut through a piece of paper and Harry loved it. Ever since she'd been a samurai in life # 9, she'd wanted to buy a katana again and now she finally had an excuse to do so.

She ran after Angel, who'd fled like the fucking coward he was while the factory burned down around them and she caught up with him eventually.

Angel clearly wasn't expecting Harry to swing a razor sharp sword at him with practised ease and had trouble defending himself while avoiding the blade. The fight was short and brutal and eventually Harry managed to skimp Angel's head with her blade, partially scalping him and knocking him to his knees. She next made to swing at his neck to cut his head off, but Angel leaned back at the last second, holding up a hand in a feeble attempt to deflect the blow.

Harry cut off Angel's left arm right above the elbow. Blood gushed from Angel's head and stump and Harry readied herself to deal the final blow when Drusilla jumped on her back out of nowhere.

“No!” Drusilla snarled while Harry whirled around, trying to stab Drusilla with her katana. “You mustn’t kill Daddy. Miss Edith said he has a job to do yet.”

“I don’t give a fuck what anyone says,” Harry growled, finally getting purchase and stabbing Drusilla in her thigh, causing her to jump back and fall, but then Spike all but ran her over in his wheelchair, sending her crashing against the floor, and by the time she’d fought off those Sid and Nancy wannabes, Angel was gone, having dragged himself to safety somewhere.

And when Harry came home after that thrilling night, having changed out of her bloody shirt in her car and hiding her blood-soaked blade in the trunk, her mother was waiting for her with her arms crossed and a huge scowl on her face.

Turned out Angel had been telling her mother lots of little lies about their relationship.

“He’s much too old for you, Buffy,” her mom said with a disapproving frown.

“Mom, I did not sleep with him,” Harry said, utterly exasperated and also kind of hurt her mother didn’t believe her. “I kissed him once or twice, and then I broke things off because I knew he wasn’t right for me.”

“You don’t have to lie about this, Buffy.”

“I’m not lying!” Harry jumped up from her bed and glared at her mother. “What I am is deeply hurt that my own mother chooses to believe an obviously mentally unstable man over her own daughter.”

That seemed to take Joyce aback and she swallowed while glancing down.

“I’ve had a long day,” Harry muttered, staring off to the side. “Please get out of my room.”

“Buffy, I’m sorry,” Joyce said, but she still didn’t sound like she actually believed Harry, just that she was sorry Harry was upset.

“Out. Please.” Harry turned her back to her mother, her inner parent deeply disapproving of Joyce’s attempt to lecture her daughter while having no clue what was really going on and not willing to listen to her daughter either.

Joyce left, perhaps realizing she had taken things too far. At least Harry hoped she did.

But they never did talk things out properly, though Harry knew they probably should have, because the next thing Harry knew she was in the hospital with some weird virus and a child killing demon on the loose. Joyce pretended nothing had happened when she visited and worried about her only child, and Harry let her, not having any energy to deal with any mother-daughter issues.

Just to add to the excitement Harry got possessed for a short while and Xander got to infiltrate the swim team where young men were transformed into creatures from the black lagoon or something and Harry was about ready for another vacation when it all went to shit for real.

Angel decided to end the world with the help of a demon named Acatla. Kendra came to town and was promptly killed by Drusilla and Harry became the number one suspect.

Snyder took great pleasure in expelling her, but Harry couldn't give two shits about that. She ran a successful business and she could easily get her GED over the coming year and still sign up for college. Or she could skip college altogether and continue her reselling business fulltime. Snyder's power trip had no real consequences for her life, no matter what the man liked to believe.

Then Spike showed up offering the world's most awkward truce, and Harry took it because she wasn't crazy and she knew that no matter how good she was, going up against Angel, Drusilla and Spike simultaneously while also stopping Acatla and saving Giles in the process was rather akin to suicide. Joyce found out about the slaying thing and freaked out, telling Harry to not come back, but Harry wasn't fazed by that too much, since she knew people said lots of things they didn't mean in the heat of the moment. Still, she had a world to save so any conversation to resolve their issue would have to wait until later.

Willow made with the mojo to give Angel back his soul, and she managed it after Angel had awoken Acatla, so Harry got to stab him in his gut and send him to hell anyway to save the world. Not that it bothered her that much at that point. She still remembered Giles' devastated face when they'd attended Jenny's funeral.

Early in the morning Harry snuck into her home, took a quick shower and got dressed in her most conservative clothes. She then took her Slayer Mobile and drove to the home of a lawyer she kept on retainer. Harry wasn't stupid and she'd worked as both a police officer and a lawyer in some of her past lives. She knew that sooner or later she'd run into trouble with the police, seeing as her destiny in life was to kill things. Not human things, but still, it was almost inevitable that Harry would have a little run in with the law eventually. So once she'd returned from LA the previous year and she was making her own money, she'd contacted a lawyer and put him on retainer.

Now she picked the man, named Simon Spencer, up from his home and together they drove to the police station. The officers there clearly hadn't expected Harry to show up with legal representation in tow, and after hours of waiting and giving statements Harry was told she was free to go. Giles had even shown up, beaten and bruised thanks to Angel's tender mercies, to give her an alibi. Not that Harry really needed one, since it was clear she had nothing to do with poor Kendra's death. She'd just discovered the body.

After thanking Mr Spencer profusely for his help and dropping him off back home, Harry treated herself to a late lunch at an In-N-Out Burger because after all the excitement of the past few days she craved some junk food, and then she drove home to face the music.

"Where have you been?" Joyce demanded, rushing into the living room when Harry stepped through the front door.

"The police station. Where they questioned me thoroughly and then let me go because I didn't kill Kendra." Harry inhaled a deep breath and sat down on the couch.

“Oh.” That seemed to take some of the wind out of Joyce’s sails and she visibly gathered herself up. “That’s... I’m glad to hear that.”

“I had to leave last night because there was a demon about to be unleashed that would have destroyed the entire world,” Harry explained as patiently as she could. She realized this was all new and terrifying for her mother, but at the same time, she also remembered how she’d tried to explain this all before to her parents and they’d chucked her into a mental institution in response. “I had to stop that demon.”

“And did you?” Joyce asked hesitantly.

Harry gestured around the room. “World’s still here. Yeah, I did it, but I had help from my friends and Giles.”

“I’m just...this is a lot to take in, Buffy,” Joyce said, sitting down beside Harry on the couch.

“I get that, trust me. I never asked for this, Mom. But I am the slayer and it is my job to kill demons, and I take that job seriously, with or without your support.” Harry wasn’t going to offer her mom false platitudes or pretend she wasn’t the slayer. “But I’m doing okay. My grades are up, I’m running my own business, and I kill the things that go bump in the night.”

“Yes, I guess you have been doing better this past schoolyear,” Joyce conceded with an uncertain smile.

“Please trust me,” Harry said in a slightly pleading voice. “I love you, Mom, and I want for us to have a close relationship, but for that to work you have to trust me.”

Joyce sighed before nodding. “I’ll try, Buffy, I promise. But you have to make an effort to not exclude me from your life as much as you’ve been doing.”

“Promise.” Harry grinned at her mother. “Now that you know the truth, I will be more open.” Not too open, since she didn’t want to freak her mother out completely, but Harry was happy she could now at least tell her mother why she was going out late in the evening or why her clothes were torn or bloody.

Their relationship was still fragile but Harry did notice that whatever rift that had opened up between them was slowly closing again.

Harry’s father had invited her to come stay with him again for the summer, and Harry drove to LA a week later, happy for the change of scenery and the lack of looming apocalypses. She spent some quality time with her dad, including a surprise week long trip to Paris, which her dad had arranged as a belated birthday present, since he hadn’t been able to visit for her actual birthday six months earlier.

This wasn’t Harry’s first time in Paris, not by a long shot, but she still loved the city and she genuinely enjoyed spending time with her father, exploring the Louvre museum and going up the Eiffel Tower and eating at so many delicious little bistros. She sent postcards to all her friends and bought so many souvenirs she had trouble closing her suitcase.

Afterwards, her father had to get back to work, but Harry didn't mind driving around LA by herself in her Slayer Mobile, visiting some quality thrift stores to stock up on all manner of merchandise to add to her eBay store. She made some excellent profit that summer, while she also slayed a number of vampires and other nasties. A girl had to keep in shape after all.

When she got home again, her mother seemed genuinely happy and relieved to see her, and Harry felt the same, and when they spent the evening together, enjoying pizza and ice cream in front of the TV it felt like something of a new start for their relationship.

Then her mother brought home some cursed mask and suddenly there were zombies everywhere during an impromptu welcome home party that got out of hand. God, Harry hated zombies of any kind.

It was then that Harry learned she'd been selfish without even realizing it when she heard that Willow, Xander, Oz and Cordelia had been defending Sunnydale and hunting vampires all summer while Harry was enjoying Paris and zooming around Hollywood and Beverly Hills looking for cheap second hand luxury goods. Yeah, she had dropped the ball there, and after listening to her friends' complaints she promised to never forsake her slaying duties like that again. The summer after the Master's defeat had been very quiet in Sunnydale, but the past couple of months had been business as usual with only a handful of teenagers to defend the whole town, and Harry now understood that being the Slayer meant that you kept to your post instead of taking two month long vacations. Lesson learned, and she gave her friends the souvenirs she'd bought them in Paris with lots of heartfelt apologies.

School started up again and Harry was no longer expelled so she attended like usual since Snyder didn't have a valid reason to keep her out. After meeting with Snyder before the summer holidays, Joyce was frothing at the mouth with anger at the injustice of Snyder expelling Buffy without any real reason at all and immediately got the schoolboard involved so before long Harry was reinstated as a student and allowed back in classes the next schoolyear. Not that she'd been worried. If Snyder had kept her out indefinitely, she would have convinced her mother to just let her take her GED and sign up for college the next year. But Harry enjoyed going to school because that allowed her to hang out with her friends, and gather in the library to spend time with Giles while they investigated whatever new threat arose.

It wasn't a threat, though, what arose next.

Harry met up with her friends at the Bronze, where Willow apparently tried to set her up with a kid named Scott, who was nice and all, but Harry was saving herself for Tom pretty much and didn't want to date anyone in the meantime, least of all a seventeen year old kid. Some awkwardness ensued as Harry tried to let the guy down gently, while Willow kept trying to not so subtly get Buffy to agree to go on a date or something.

But then Harry saw a girl leave with what was obviously a vampire, judging by his twenty-year-old dance moves, and she rushed after them out the door.

Where she got a very welcome surprise when the girl kicked the vampire's butt and turned to her.

“I’ve got this,” Tom said, after pausing for a brief moment while her memories returned in an unexpected rush. “You’re Buffy, right? I’m Faith.” And with that, Tom made short work of the vampire. Harry admired her form and had to keep herself from jumping into Tom’s arms and kissing her silly in sheer relief to have found her at last. Harry’s friends were watching and she wouldn’t be able to explain away that sudden act of intimacy.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Harry said with a huge smile after the vamp was dust.

“Oh no,” Tom said and pulled Harry into a tight hug, which Harry returned at once with a happy sigh. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“I should probably take you to meet Giles, my Watcher,” Harry said once she stepped back from the hug.

“No,” Xander said, sounding mightily disappointed. “That can wait, right? Maybe just hang out with us this evening?”

“Nah,” Harry said with a chuckle, gently grabbing Tom’s arm and dragging her along. “You guys stay and have a good time. Duty calls for us. To the Slayer Mobile.”

“Aw, man,” Xander said, shaking his head while Cordelia slapped his arm.

Harry didn’t stay to see what else happened. She all but pushed Tom into her Beetle and threw herself behind the wheel and tore out of there, tires screeching across the asphalt.

Tom looked at her in surprise. “Are we in a hurry?”

Harry didn’t reply until she parked her car in a dark stretch of street beside one of Sunnydale’s many cemeteries. “Yes, because I’ve missed you and I need to kiss you right now.” And giving Tom no chance to reply, Harry crushed her lips to Tom’s, who grinned for a second before returning the kiss.

“I got my memories back more than a year ago,” Harry whispered after they snogged for a good ten minutes. “I’ve missed you so much it almost drove me nuts at times. Being a Slayer is lonely work even without a missing soulmate.”

“I’m here, darling,” Tom said, trailing her fingers down Harry’s cheek. “From now on, we’re in this together.”

“Thank fuck.” Harry rested her forehead against Tom’s and just breathed for a moment, finally feeling whole again, with a sort of inner-peace washing over her that she hadn’t even realized she’d been missing before.

“Can we visit your Watcher, though?” Tom asked after a few peaceful, quiet moments. “I’ve got some news to share.”

“Sure. He knows, by the way.” Harry started the car and buckled her seatbelt. “I told him about our past lives.”

“Really?” Tom seemed intrigued by that idea, since they hadn’t really told anyone about their situation before, not in any detail. “How did that go?”

“Better than expected. At first Giles was a little disbelieving but ever since then he’s become a good friend on top of being my Watcher.”

“Yeah,” Tom said with a thoughtful look. “Must be nice to have an adult friend to turn to from time to time while you’re still physically a teenager surrounded by nothing but other teenagers.”

Harry cracked up, and shook her head, “You have no idea. The petty drama I have to deal with.”

“Darling, say no more. We’ve raised plenty of kids together.”

Harry briefly glanced at Tom with a wide grin. “We’ve been plenty of kids together.”

“Yes, that too. But I’d like to think we have better self-control, even as teenagers,” Tom said with a haughty little sniff.

Reaching over, Harry patted Tom’s knee. “Sure, babe, whatever you say.”

It was only just after nine, so Harry didn’t feel too bad knocking on Giles’ door unannounced.

“Buffy? Is something wrong?” Giles asked the moment he found her on his doorstep.

“Giles,” Harry said, beaming at her Watcher. “I’d like you to meet Tom.”

Giles’ eyes widened and his mouth dropped open a little while Tom stepped up to him.

“Also known as Faith Lebane, slayer,” Tom said, holding out her hand, which Giles shook after he recovered from his brief moment of shock.

They made some small talk while Giles put the kettle on, which quickly turned into serious slayer talk when Giles asked after Tom’s watcher.

“Elizabeth Rosegard,” Tom said, shoulders slumping and eyes shimmering. “She was murdered by Kakistos, an older than dirt vampire. Also the reason I came here, because I cannot take that monster by myself.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Giles said while Harry slid her arm around Tom’s waist and pulled her into a brief hug. “I’ll make a report to the council and see what they have to say. In the meantime, of course you can stay with us.”

Harry snorted. “Giles, I don’t think I have to explain this to you, but the Council may be in for a surprise. Tom’s staying here indefinitely.”

“Yeah, not leaving your side, darling, no matter what any Council says,” Tom quickly agreed. “Technically, we don’t even work for them.” At Giles’ confused look, Tom added, “We’ve

never signed any contracts and we don't receive a salary, simple as that."

"Yeah, what is up with that? So unfair," Harry said, suddenly feeling all affronted. She had mentioned that to Giles a time or two, and while Giles sympathized with her plight, being expected to do all the dangerous work without any pay while Giles received a generous Watcher's salary on top of his income as a high school librarian, there was nothing he personally could do about it. "Anyway, now that Tom and I have found each other, wild demons couldn't separate us, let alone a bunch of stuffy old, white men."

"And I expected nothing less," Giles said with a bit of a sappy smile as he looked between them both. "At any rate, I'm glad you found each other again."

"So are we," Harry said, leaning her head on Tom's shoulder.

They stayed for tea and more small talk, in which Tom recounted some of the adversaries she'd faced, and Harry let Tom in on her improvements to her life.

"You could easily join my eBay business," Harry offered at once when the subject of an income for Tom came up.

"Sure, I'd love to," Tom said and then fell quiet for a moment, turning her mug of tea around in her hands. "But perhaps it's also a smart idea not to put all our eggs in one website. You know eBay can screw over a successful business overnight by changing their terms."

"Don't remind me," Harry muttered. They'd suffered big losses in more than one lifetime when some website suddenly introduced new rules and they had to scramble to keep their ecommerce income stable.

"So I'll help at first, but at the same time I'll start a small web design business," Tom mused while looking at Harry in question. "Focus on smaller businesses and convince them the time for a website of their own is now. And I can also pick up some freelance translation jobs."

"It sounds like you won't have to worry about an income, at least," Giles said with an approving nod. Giles had at first seemed highly sceptical when Harry had started her eBay business, but eventually, upon seeing how much she enjoyed the work and how much money she was making on the side, he'd admitted to being impressed with these new opportunities to earn a living over the internet.

"Oh yeah, we'll land on our feet," Tom said with an easy smile. "We always do."

Tom was staying at a sleazy motel and Harry was reluctant to drive her there, but she also couldn't bring her home unexpected, especially since it was close to midnight already and she didn't want to spring this on her mother while she was probably already in bed.

"Darling, don't worry," Tom said while waving away Harry's concerns. "I'll be fine. We've lived in much worse places and it's only temporary. Once I get some money going I'll rent a studio or one bedroom apartment or so."

“Yeah, all right,” Harry sighed, pulling up in front of the motel and reluctantly turning off the engine. “I don’t mean to sound like a spoiled brat, but I just want us to be together, especially after last life.”

A brief shadow of pain passed over Tom’s face. “I know the feeling. And we will be, Harry, I promise. We just need the barest amount of patience to set everything up.”

“I love you, babe,” Harry whispered, leaning over to give Tom a heartfelt kiss.

“Love you, too, darling.” Tom smiled against Harry’s lips before pulling back and opening the car door. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Also, we should get cell phones.”

“Yes!” Excellent idea,” Harry called after Tom, waving until Tom disappeared inside her room. With a heavy yet happy sigh, Harry started her car and headed home. Tom was back and there was no force in this world that would keep them apart.

Her mother tried, briefly, when Harry invited Tom over for dinner. Tom, being her charming self, made a very nice first impression on Joyce, but the moment Harry joined her mother in the kitchen, Joyce immediately suggested Harry quit her destiny and let Tom do all the slaying from now on.

“Mom,” Harry said, quietly outraged at the mere suggestion she abandon her fellow slayer. “I will not leave Faith to fight by herself. We are both slayers, and we will both fight, side by side.”

“I just mean that you might have a chance at a normal life,” Joyce said with pleading eyes.

“I don’t want a normal life if it means someone else has to pay the ultimate price for it,” Harry said through gritted teeth before turning her back on Joyce and joining Tom in the dining room again.

Harry knew she probably should talk about her future in more detail with her mother, because it was clear Joyce had very different ideas about Harry’s life than Harry herself did, but then Kakistos came to town and Harry and Tom kicked his butt, and they got busy with other threats like that boy who went all Mr Hyde on everyone and Slayerfest 1998 was apparently a thing now, though Harry and Tom had no problems taking out that hodgepodge of assassins come to kill them.

By that time, Tom had found a two-bedroom apartment not too far from Giles' place. Surprisingly, rent was reasonably low considering this was California, but Sunnydale did have a bit of a negative reputation, not to mention a significantly higher mortality rate than surrounding towns, so clearly that kept rent down somewhat. Harry chipped in on the rent, since she already knew she’d be spending lots of time there, and once she turned eighteen in January, would probably move in with Tom full-time.

Thankfully, Harry’s friends took to Tom right away and helped Tom decorate her new apartment with donations of surplus items recovered from their family’s basements, attics and garages. Tom and Harry also bought lots of furniture and household goods at their local thrift stores while they were looking for merchandise and before long the apartment looked like a

home, albeit an eclectic one. The second bedroom was turned into a storage room slash office, from which they could run their businesses.

Tom did get involved in the eBay business, easily doubling their profit, since she had plenty of free time during the day, while also finding a few local clients to design websites for. Tom signed up to get her GED and also applied for colleges, especially the one in Sunnydale, since Harry begged her to, not wanting to go through college without her soulmate.

And then the next step was coming out to their friends and family. Obviously, Harry and Tom were in a relationship, but no one besides Giles knew it, so it was time to tell their loved ones.

The reactions they got from their friends, who'd come over to watch a movie at Tom's apartment on a Thursday night, were varied.

"I'm dating Faith," Harry said with an enormous smile, giving her friends an expectant look.

"Cool," Oz said, with an approving nod.

"I did not see this coming," Cordelia said, looking around the room. "Did anyone see this coming? I mean, I'm not surprised Buffy plays for her own team, what with her lack of dating anyone of the opposite gender, but I still didn't see it coming."

"Oh no," Willow sighed, face a picture of guilt. "I tried to set you up with Scott, and all this time you didn't want to date a boy and you did tell me you weren't interested, but I just thought maybe the whole Angel thing had gotten you down so I pushed anyway and I am so sorry, Buffy."

"Willow, breathe," Harry said with a snicker. "It's fine, really, no hard feelings."

"Is this a dream?" Xander asked, sounding slightly panicked. "Am I dreaming right now? Because I swear, I have had dreams about Buffy and Faith doing non-slaying things together, but they usually start with less clothes on."

"Xander!" Cordelia turned in her seat to glare at him. "No one wants to know the kind of things you dream about, especially when they don't involve me."

Harry rolled her eyes. Teenaged boys. And she should know, having been one more times than she could remember at that point.

Just as Harry got ready to tell Joyce about her new girlfriend, the whole town went nuts and Joyce and Giles turned into the teenagers from hell because of the band candy. Snyder was suddenly their best friend, Giles and Joyce couldn't stop snogging and Harry and Tom were the only people left in the whole of Sunnydale with an ounce of common sense left, or so it felt.

Still, they all saved the day and lots of innocent babies, so they couldn't complain too much in the end.

Afterwards, Tom came over to hang out and Harry held her hand and stepped up to her mother, who was sitting on the couch watching some TV.

“Mom, I have to tell you something,” Harry said, nervous but also excited, because she loved Tom and she wanted everyone to know how happy Tom made her. “I’m dating Faith.”

Joyce looked between them with wide eyes. “What?”

“We’re dating,” Harry said slowly, holding up their entwined hands. “As in, Faith is my girlfriend.”

“No,” Joyce said, blinking very rapidly, lips pursed in a thin line.

“What?” Harry asked, confused. She wasn’t expecting a negative reaction, since as far as she knew Joyce wasn’t homophobic at all. She worked with a gay couple in the gallery, often coming home with funny stories about them.

“No,” Joyce said, louder now, shoulders straightening and eyes narrowing. “I forbid this, Buffy.”

And something in Harry snapped. The world turned very still around her while her breathing picked up.

“Why?” Tom asked quietly, looking very surprised by this turn of events.

“I do not owe you any explanation, but know this, as long as Buffy lives under my roof she will obey my rules, and I want you to leave, Faith, and not come back,” Joyce said, sounding nothing if not determined. “You’ve done enough already.”

“Fine,” Harry said, ears ringing slightly. Perhaps she was overreacting, but after all the crap her mother had pulled on her over the last few years, she was just done with her. The mental institution, not believing Harry’s word over Angel’s accusations, basically throwing Harry out after finding out about the slayer thing, albeit temporarily, and more recently, constantly trying to get Harry to quit her destiny that she couldn’t quit to let Tom take the fall.

Yeah, Harry was just done and it ended now.

“You think that if you force me to choose between you and Faith, that I will choose you, but you are wrong, Mom,” Harry said with steel in her voice and fire in her eyes. “I will never choose anyone over Faith, not even you. Besides, this is emotional blackmail, which I won’t be partaking in.”

“Buffy...” Joyce looked stuck somewhere between panic and determination.

“No, listen. Here is what is going to happen. Faith and I will be gathering my belongings, and I will stay with her for the foreseeable future. If you try to involve the police in this, since I am still a minor and technically under your authority, know that I will order my lawyer to get me emancipated and I will never speak to you again.”

“Buffy, that isn’t fair,” Joyce said, jumping up from the couch.

“What you are doing isn’t fair, Mom.” Harry gave her mother a hard look. “You haven’t been fair in a very long time, so please take your time alone to think about the things you’ve done and perhaps how you could have prevented them from happening, and maybe, a very small maybe, I’ll forgive you at some point in the future. Come on, Faith, let’s get my things.”

Thanks to their slayer strength, they got Harry’s stuff in record time, especially since they’d already moved all the merchandise to Tom’s second bedroom during the previous weeks. Joyce stood to the side, looking lost one moment and enraged the next, but Harry ignored her. She loved her mother, she really did, but she had too much crap on her plate to have to deal with her mother’s emotional blackmail, not to mention she was too old to be treated like a rebellious teenager going through some undesirable phase.

“I’m sorry,” Tom said as they drove Harry’s car, which was loaded to the brim with clothes and books and weapons, to Tom’s apartment.

“Me, too,” Harry sighed, fingers tapping against the steering wheel in agitation. “I think this is about the slaying, not so much the being two girls in a relationship.”

“How is this about slaying?” Tom asked with a quirked eyebrow as she glanced at Harry.

“She’s been trying to get me to quit slaying now that you are here, believing that if you take over my job I can have a normal life, or what she believes to be a normal life anyway.”

“Go to Harvard or Yale, find a nice hubbie, work a good job, pop out a few babies, that sort of thing,” Tom guessed with an unflattering snort.

“Yeah, pretty much that. But she’s never, ever once asked me if I even want any of those things.” Harry pulled into a parking lot in front of Tom’s apartment. “Which I don’t want. I’m the slayer. Not a career I’ve chosen, but one I intend to see through.”

“Yeah, same for me,” Tom agreed with a smile.

“And together we might even manage to not die before we’re twenty,” Harry added with a sarcastic roll of her eyes. She was well aware she could die every time she went out to patrol. She tried not to think about it too often but it was always there in the back of her mind. Slayers didn’t live very long as a rule, which only made Harry more determined to spend whatever time they had in this life together with Tom.

“The mortality rate amongst slayers is a slight cause for concern, yes,” Tom agreed while shaking her head before getting out of the car to start unloading Harry’s entire life.

Joyce didn’t send the police to come drag Harry away from her new home, so that was good, but she did send Giles.

“Joyce sent me. I’m sorry,” Giles said immediately once Harry waved him inside. Tom got the kettle going, since they might be Americans this life, in their heart of hearts they were British and always enjoyed a good cup of tea, especially in times of crisis.

“Me, too,” Harry said while they sat down on the couch as Tom served the tea, using a beautiful porcelain tea set they’d found for a few bucks at a thrift store. “I’m pretty sure this is because my mom is convinced I can just quit being the slayer as long as Tom picks up the slack or something. She just forgot to ask me what I wanted, I guess.”

“Yes, it does seem that she’s cast Faith in the role of the bad guy in this scenario,” Giles agreed with a solemn nod.

“I’m not going back until she apologizes,” Harry said, mind made up. “If I go back at all, since I kinda like living with my soulmate.”

“I’ll tell her that,” Giles said with a sigh, and then gave them both a careful look. “The Council got in contact. They’re sending a new Watcher for Faith soon.”

Tom blinked and then leaned back in the couch. “Nope. Tell them not to bother. I quit.”

“What?” Giles asked, obviously surprised.

“I quit the Council, not the slaying,” Tom said, mouth slowly curving up into a wicked grin. “Until the Council agrees to pay me a decent salary, I quit. Simple as that.”

“Oh!” Harry gave Giles an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Giles. But I quit the Council, too. Not you, personally, you’re great. But from now on, I will only work for the Council if they pay me.”

Giles seemed dumbstruck for a moment and then he laughed. “Oh, I can’t wait to tell them that.”

Life # 73: That time Tom and Harry died of the Black Death

Chapter Summary

Life # 73: That time Tom and Harry died of the Black Death

Chapter Notes

I've spent most of November and December getting my mental health (specifically my depression) under control and myself back on my mental tracks, and just as I mostly succeeded at this my mom got covid-19 right before New Year. My sister and I have been caring for her at her home until her condition worsened and she's been admitted to the hospital where she's now fighting this horrible disease. My mom is a 77-year-old cancer survivor with Alzheimer's who smokes and has high-blood pressure, so she ticks all the high-risk boxes. There is nothing we can do now but wait to see if she pulls through. This whole ordeal has been incredibly stressful as I'm sure you can imagine, and some of that stress had to go somewhere, so I somehow came up with this little chapter. Writing it has been a welcome distraction, even if the story itself deals with lots of death.

Warning for talk about suicide and death. And warning for the bubonic plague and all the unpleasantness that comes with it. Nuff said.

Life # 73: That time Tom and Harry died of the Black Death

Bremen, Holy Roman Empire, 1350

"You're going to have to repeat that," Tom rasped, barely able to keep his eyes open, his cheeks glowing with a fever. "Because it sounded like you just suggested I die a painful death from the bubonic plague to satisfy your curiosity."

"Well, no," Harry said, adjusting her woollen skirts as she kneeled beside their simple bed so she could wipe the sweat off Tom's forehead with a cold, damp cloth. "But also yes."

Tom managed to crack open one bloodshot eye to give his soulmate a half-hearted glare. "Harry, let's just end it now. There's nothing stopping us."

"I know." Harry swiped the cloth across Tom's cheeks. They had a simple rule when it came to suicide. As long as they didn't have young children they could step out of a life if it became too painful one way or another. But if they had children that weren't yet adults and

capable of looking after themselves, they had to stick around, no matter what. Both Tom and Harry had been orphans their first life and they weren't about to put their own children through a similar ordeal if they could help it.

This life they lost their infant daughter to scarlet fever the previous year and Harry had suffered a miscarriage just a few months prior, probably due to malnutrition. Food was getting scarcer by the day what with the Black Death sweeping across the whole of Europe and Asia, leaving millions and millions dead in its wake, with fields of crops left to rot without enough workers to harvest them.

Tom ran a small business with his brother Hans as grain importers, bringing in wheat and barley on merchant ships in Bremen port in what one day would be modern Germany, but due to the plague, commerce was in decline and Tom barely brought home enough money to keep them fed and housed. Harry earned a few coins on the side as an herb woman, selling homemade remedies for things like rashes and headaches, but while she could cure many small ailments with her modern knowledge of medicinal plants, even she couldn't produce any antibiotics to cure the bubonic plague without modern technology.

"Aren't you at least a bit medically curious, though?" Harry asked, sitting back and giving Tom a pleading look, hoping to tickle Tom's professional curiosity. They'd both been medical doctors more than once at that point. "We're in the middle of the great plague and we've got this unique opportunity to experience what it's like to die from the bubonic plague."

Tom made a throaty sound of disbelief which ended in a coughing fit. Harry reached for a clay cup of boiled and cooled water for Tom to drink.

"Think about it," Harry rambled on because her inner-scientist and medical doctor were insanely curious about what it was like to go through such a devastating historical event. They'd known they were going to live through the Black Death once they got their memories back and realized where and when they were living and they'd taken every precaution they could, keeping their small house in Bremen pest free as much as possible. Harry had adopted a handful of cats over the years to help with this. Their small dog, a terrier mix named Nils who had been an excellent rat catcher, had been taken away the previous year, along with all other dogs in the city of Bremen, in the mistaken belief they were spreading the plague while in reality they were holding the spread back by keeping the local rat population under control. Harry had vocally and vehemently opposed this policy until Tom had literally dragged her away once the authorities had threatened to throw Harry into the slammer for obstructing the law.

With the dogs gone, and the local cat population outnumbered when it came to the number of rats, the fleas on the rats were free to multiply as they wished, just like their hosts, and bite humans left and right, thereby spreading the bacteria *Yersinia Pestis*, which caused the plague, like a wildfire.

Not that Harry was ultimately surprised that they'd been unable to keep the plague out of their home, no matter how hard they'd tried. It was the Middle Ages. Personal hygiene hadn't been invented yet, nor did people understand one single thing about the human body and how it really worked.

Any ‘doctors’ that existed during that time were still convinced the theory of the four humors was the height of modern medicine and bloodletting was the answer to every ailment under the sun.

For months Harry had seen the people around them succumb to the horrible disease, with people leading carts through the streets, pulled by oxen or dogs, to pick up the many dead bodies that threatened to fill the city, to be deposited into mass graves beyond the city limits.

It was a massacre and Harry knew it was only a matter of time before either she or Tom came down with it.

And then Tom came home early from work one day with a raging fever and a bubo, a pus-filled swelling on his lymph node developing in his neck and Harry knew their time had come and their number was up.

The Black Death had arrived.

And no matter that Harry didn’t want Tom to suffer a painful death, she couldn’t help but be incredibly curious. In modern times the bubonic plague was an afterthought for most doctors. It popped up in some corners of the world from time to time, including certain parts of the USA, but all you needed was a few rounds of antibiotics and your chances of survival were almost guaranteed.

But to see the whole world tremble and society crumble under the weight of one of the worst epidemics the world had ever seen was something else entirely and Harry’s inner-academic was unable to resist the temptation to experience every single aspect of it, no matter the personal cost.

“Think about it, babe,” Harry whispered, picking up a different cup and holding it to Tom’s lips. “Think about what an historical opportunity this is, to experience this event intimately.”

Tom sipped the contents of the cup and made a face once he swallowed.

“Willow bark tea,” Harry said with a chuckle. “It’ll help with your fever. I added some honey but I can tell from your expression it wasn’t enough to mask the bitterness.”

Tom managed to open his eyes for a second and give Harry a look that was both filled with adoration and exasperation. Harry’s grin softened and her chest glowed with the realization how much she loved Tom and how lucky she was to have him by her side in every life they got to live, no matter how disastrous a life it might be.

Just as Harry was about to give into Tom’s obvious discomfort with the idea of dying a slow and painful death and call the whole idea off so they could slit their wrists and end things quickly, Tom sighed and nodded his head once.

Harry perked up and stared at Tom in disbelief. “Was that a yes? Did you just agree to my crazy plan?”

“Yes,” Tom breathed and immediately groaned in pain when Harry all but threw her arms across his chest and gave him a hug as best she could.

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled with a sheepish smile while she sat back again. “Thanks, babe, I really appreciate it. Now, please tell me how you feel.”

“Sick,” Tom breathed, eyes firmly closed again.

Harry glared at her annoying soulmate, but it had no effect since Tom didn’t even see her. “Could you maybe put a bit more effort into that description?”

Tom waited for half a minute at least before he finally said with something bordering on a pained smirk, “Fucking sick.”

Sighing, Harry pushed herself up to her feet, conceding defeat for the time being. “Just rest, darling. I’m going to the market to pick up some supplies. We’ve got a busy week ahead, dying of the Black Death and all that.” Harry pressed a quick kiss to Tom’s warm forehead, but her soulmate had already dozed off, exhausted as he was by the high fever raging through him.

Harry grabbed her woollen scarf and threw it across her shoulders before picking up the wicker basket she used for shopping. Lastly she collected their money pouch, with the last of their meagre coins, and stuffed it down her dress in between her breasts. That way no pickpocket could get at it without Harry noticing.

Before she opened the door, Harry pressed a cloth drenched in lavender water over her nose and mouth and then she was finally ready to buy some supplies. The faint scent of lavender did very little to mask the overwhelming sickly sweet stench of disease and death that filled the whole city around her as Harry hurried through the narrow streets towards the market square. Just ahead of her, a few men wearing filthy cloths over their mouths carried a body wrapped in a stained sheet out of a house. As they tried to push the body onto the waiting cart, a leg fell out, displaying a necrotic foot with its black, rotting flesh to the world. Harry pushed any revulsion she wanted to feel down, reminding herself she was a doctor, or at least had been in more than one life, and that she’d seen worse.

She wasn’t sure if she’d ever smelled worse, though, as she inhaled the stench of piss and shit and pus and blood and dying flesh as she walked past the cart, keeping as much distance as she could.

And then she remembered the trenches in Belgium and yeah, she’d definitely smelled worse.

Harry still desperately wanted to take a hot bath to help her feel clean again but since the start of the plague all the bathhouses had been closed in the city and they had to make do with washing themselves at home using a rag and a minimal amount of expensive soap.

It was one of the things most people got wrong about the Middle Ages, Harry now knew as she lived during that time. Most people thought the inhabitants of the Middle Ages were filthy peasants who never washed.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Middle Ages were a time where people enjoyed communal bathing in public bathhouses throughout most of Europe. It was expected to bathe at least once a week, a habit the Vikings had introduced some centuries before. Some people, like Harry and Tom, went twice a week if they could afford it.

But then the Black Death happened and the bathhouses were closed one after the other for fear of spreading the plague and as far as Harry knew they never really reopened again. It was the centuries after the Middle Ages that people stopped bathing regularly.

Once she reached the market, Harry stocked up on dried peas, some carrots and onions and a small chunk of salted pork. That put together would make a huge pot of pea soup that would keep them well-nourished for the coming days and would be easy for Tom to eat as well, sick as he was.

As Harry walked home, she took in the crooked houses, the muddy pathways, the children running around with dirt staining their cheeks, knowing that soon they'd be leaving this life behind now that Tom was dying. One way or the other, Harry would follow him the moment he was gone.

It had been an interesting experience, Harry thought, to live in this part of the world during the devastating times of the second Great Plague, but she was also looking forward to a new life, hopefully one with a little less death in it.

That was the reality of living during times without modern medicine. Death was an ever-present entity hovering over everyone's heads, ready to snatch their souls up over the simplest of illnesses or accidents.

Harry had lost her mother to what she expected was some sort of cancer, probably of the bowels, some ten years ago. Harry's father she'd lost to an infection of his tooth. Harry had begged her father to just go to the barber's to have the infected tooth pulled, which was the only thing that might possibly save his life, but her father was a stubborn man and, Harry suspected, slightly suicidal after the loss of her mother, and he'd refused to take any action. He'd been dead a week later.

Harry's older brother had drowned when he'd fallen off the barge he worked on, and Harry's older sister had died in childbirth the year before.

And that was all the immediate family Harry once had. Now she was alone, save for Tom and whatever family he had remaining.

Life could really be tough in the Middle Ages, even without a deadly disease being spread by fleas on the rats that were everywhere.

Right before she reached their small home Harry saw a monster of a rat scurry off into the shadows.

Fucking things.

Tom mumbled a greeting when Harry called out to him. She helped him drink a few sips of water to make sure he wouldn't dehydrate because of the fever and then she set to making the pea soup, which was pretty standard.

All they had was a hearth and a few cauldrons. Stoves weren't available yet, so everything was cooked in one pot, no matter what you had to work with. Bread, grains, meat, eggs, vegetables, it all went into the same pot to boil for a few hours and once it was ready to dish up it was called pottage, no matter what was actually in it.

Harry was making genuine pea soup, though, even though it might as well be called pottage, too.

Harry filled the cauldron with water, added the dried peas, the cut-up salted pork and the chopped carrots and onions and then she hung it over the fire in the hearth to cook for a while until it was done.

Not the most delicious meal she'd ever prepared but filling and nutritious and the last thing they'd be eating in this life one way or the other, since Harry had spent the last of their coins and nothing new was coming in since Tom wasn't working. And they'd both be dead before long anyway.

Right as Harry got ready to give Tom some more willow bark tea, there was a knock on the door.

Tom's brother Hans, tall and with a dark beard, and their stooped, aging mother greeted her once Harry opened the door a crack.

"Is it the plague?" Tom's mother asked, her wrinkled face creased even further with worry.

"Yes, it appears so," Harry whispered, her heart aching at seeing the obvious grief on their faces at the knowledge they'd soon be losing their brother and son. It was different for her, Harry knew. Yes, she was worried for Tom, she always was, but she also knew that even though this life was coming to an end, a new one would be waiting for them.

Tom's brother and mother had no such comfort.

"Here," Tom's mother said as she pulled a loaf of dark bread out of her apron where she'd kept it wrapped up. "You need to eat well these coming days. We will pray for you both."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely as she accepted the generous gift, her eyes getting a little wet knowing this was probably the last time she'd see her brother and mother in law. They were both good and kind people and had always been welcoming to Harry once she married Tom. "Wait a second."

Harry hurried inside her home and collected a few things in a clean cloth. She handed the small bundle to Hans. "Willow bark, make it into tea if someone gets the plague. It will help keep the fever down. And comfrey, make that into a poultice to put on the buboes, to keep them clean. Just in case."

“My thanks, good sister,” Hans said with a solemn nod and they said a quick goodbye.

“Was that Hans?” Tom mumbled as Harry approached him with a cup of willow bark tea.

“Yeah, and your mother,” Harry said, kneeling beside their bed and putting the cup against Tom’s dry lips. “They were worried about you.”

Tom sipped the willow bark tea quietly, but in his eyes Harry could see her own thoughts of loss reflected.

“We’ll miss them,” Harry whispered, giving voice to the kind of emotions they always faced at the end of one of their lives.

“I hope they survive,” Tom said with a tired sigh. “They’re good people.”

“We both got lucky with our families this time,” Harry said with smile she made as bright as she could given their dire circumstances.

Tom gave a slow nod but seemed too exhausted to say anything else.

“Just rest, babe.” Harry ran her fingers through Tom’s dark hair before she got up to check on her pea soup.

And that was their routine for the next few days. Harry took care of Tom as best she could given the limited means she had to work with. She gave Tom willow bark tea every few hours to keep the fever under control and she washed away any pus and blood that leaked from the many buboes that now adorned Tom’s neck and inner thighs. And once Tom was clean and somewhat lucid, Harry helped him eat a small bowl of pea soup.

“You’ve got to keep your strength up,” Harry insisted when Tom had initially refused her soup.

“I’ll be dead in a few days,” Tom grumbled with a fairly weak glare, but he had finished half a bowl of soup, so Harry counted that as a win.

“Are they very painful?” Harry asked, equal parts fascinated and disgusted as she examined a bubo before cleaning it with essence of comfrey.

Tom was unable to say anything, just released an animalistic sound as he jerked away from her.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Harry mumbled while hurrying up to not give Tom more pain than was necessary. “Also, I think your fingertips are turning necrotic. Can you feel that?” Harry gently pinched a blackening finger.

“Fuck you,” Tom said with feeling.

And then Harry ran out of willow bark. And since she’d spent their last coins on food days before she wasn’t in a position to buy any more either.

Tom's fever spiked within hours and with it came a delirium.

"Harry," Tom gasped in perfect, modern English as he lay in their bed, staring up at the ceiling with glassy eyes, sheets pushed aside even as he was shivering as the cold air hit his sweaty body. "Harry! Your mask, Harry! It's broken! Fuck, put on your mask!"

Harry stood still as a statue as she stared down at her soulmate hallucinating while stuck in a fever dream. Or rather, a fever nightmare. Harry knew exactly what Tom was seeing. It had been one of their more traumatizing lives thus far.

In life number 66 they'd been soldiers during World War 1, fighting in the trenches in Belgium. That whole experience had been a clusterfuck. Harry had no words to describe some of the horrors they'd seen there, that they'd lived through.

"Harry, they're gassing us! Put on your mask, Harry!"

They lived through shitty lives from time to time. Abusive families, poverty, discrimination, natural disasters, slavery, arranged underage marriages, they'd seen it all by that point.

But little was as traumatizing as war, and few wars were as traumatizing as The Great War.

"Your mask, Harry! It's broken! They're gassing us!"

A tear slipped down Harry's cheek as she realized she was the biggest, most selfish cunt that had ever walked the earth.

Here was her soulmate, the love of her many lives, reliving horrors that shouldn't have been lived even once because Harry insisted he draw out his painful death to satisfy her curiosity.

The biggest. Most Selfish. Cunt. Ever.

Harry shook herself, wiping a hand across her eyes before turning around and walking towards the wooden chest in which she kept her dried herbs. She dug through what little stock she had left until she found the one thing that if authorities knew she had it would earn her a direct trip to the gallows.

She held up the small, murky vial that contained pure essence of deadly nightshade.

Derived from the plant also known as belladonna, it contained a strong toxin that was lethal in the right doses. Harry produced her essence from both the berries and the roots of the plant, thereby upping the toxicity.

"Harry! Your mask! The gas is coming!"

"I'm here, darling," Harry whispered as she sat down on the edge of the bed, breaking the wax seal on the vial.

"Your mask!"

“I know, sweetheart,” Harry said as soothingly as she could while tears trailed down her cheeks and dripped from her chin onto Tom’s bare chest. “I’ll put on my mask as soon as you drink this.”

Tom looked straight up with unseeing eyes and Harry knew he was stuck deep in whatever hallucination he was seeing.

“The gas!”

“Just drink this, love, and the gas will go away.” When Harry put the vial against Tom’s lips he obediently opened his mouth and Harry emptied the whole vial into his mouth, giving him more than enough to offer him a quick death. Then she clamped her hand over his mouth when some of the bitterness registered and Tom inevitably tried to cough some of it back up. “Just drink, darling, swallow it all, and it will soon be over.”

Tom lay staring up at the ceiling for many long minutes while Harry all but held her breath. “I’m so sorry, Tom,” Harry whispered against his bearded cheek. “I’m so sorry I put you through this. I promise I won’t ever do something stupid like this again.”

“Harry, the gas...” Tom managed to breathe before succumbing to violent convulsions that had his entire body rocking the bed. Harry held him down as best as she could, but thankfully Tom’s body was exhausted from fighting the plague for days and days now and didn’t have much energy left to resist this new poison with and the convulsions didn’t last more than a few minutes.

“Sshh. It’s almost over. I’m so sorry, darling. I’ll see you on the other side.”

Tom’s last breath was a true death rattle and Harry sat perfectly still for a few minutes, waiting to see if another breath would come, before checking his pulse.

The heart had stopped and Tom was dead.

Harry managed to close his glassy eyes before burying her face in her hands and crying with great, heaving sobs.

She knew she’d see Tom again, knew there was another life waiting for them, there always was, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t filled with grief over seeing Tom dead once again.

“I’m so sorry, love, so fucking sorry.” Harry finally managed to get up and look around the room. She’d used all her essence of deadly nightshade on Tom so that was out. Normally she’d just slice her wrists open. Bleeding out like that wasn’t that bad of a way to go. The initial cuts hurt a bit, but soon enough there was an almost pleasant light-headedness before slipping into darkness almost unnoticed.

Just as easy as falling asleep, as Sirius had once called it many, many lifetimes ago.

But somehow, having seen Tom suffer for days, taking the easy way out seemed wrong to Harry.

Tom had suffered because of Harry’s selfish demands, and now Harry should suffer as well.

Harry used their only knife, which they mostly used for cooking, to slice open the palm of her hand and then she dragged this open, bleeding wound across every pus-oozing bubo on Tom's cooling body.

There were three ways in which the *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria could make you ill and ultimately kill you. There was the bubonic plague, named for the buboes on the lymph nodes as the bacteria attacked the lymphatic system. Then there was the pneumonic plague, where the bacteria infected the lungs. And finally, there was the septicaemic plague, where the bacteria infected the blood.

Septicaemic plague was the rarest and most serious of the plague varieties, and as far as Harry was concerned exactly what she deserved.

For the next few hours Harry busied herself with washing Tom's body and covering it with a clean sheet. Then she tidied up around their small home so that whomever found their bodies (probably Tom's brother Hans) wouldn't be stuck with a messy house to clean. She washed out the cauldron she'd used for the pea soup and swept up the dirty rushes, especially around the bed where they'd been soiled with blood and pus while Tom had convulsed violently.

By the time she was done she felt achy and cold and feverish and she knew the bacteria was doing its work. Harry lay down in their bed beside Tom's body and waited for death to come for her and transport her soul to a whole new body.

The fever got her first.

Her whole body ached and her teeth clattered and skin glowed as her mind wandered farther and farther away until he found himself in the trenches, standing in deep mud up way over his ankles.

"Tom?" Harry looked around, adjusting the helmet on his head. "Tom, where are you?"

Tom wasn't there.

The ice-cold mud squelched around Harry's feet as he walked on through the trenches, occasionally almost tripping over one of the many dead bodies that lined the narrow ways, all of them staring at Harry with lifeless, glassy eyes.

Andrews was sitting in the mud to Harry's left, staring down at his feet while pulling on his laces.

"Andrews, have you seen Tom?"

"I can't get my boots off," Andrews muttered as he violently pulled on one of his boots. "Sir, why can't I get my boots off?"

"Because your feet and boots are frozen solid," Harry said, remembering Andrews' gruesome fate. Both feet were severely frostbitten once they'd finally managed to pry his frozen boots off and got his feet thawed. They'd turned necrotic and Andrews had lost them both,

returning home an invalid unable to provide for himself and depending on his aging parents for everything. He'd killed himself within the year.

"Oh." Andrews stared up at Harry in disbelief and then went back to violently pulling on his boots.

Harry left him to it and continued his trek across the freezing trenches to find his soulmate.

Nearby mortar fire rained mud and dirt and body parts all over him, but Harry continued on.

Johnson was missing half his head and several large rats were feasting on what was left of his brain.

Fucking things.

More rats showed up, crowding Johnson's entire body as they tore at his bloody clothes and ate his rotting flesh all the way down to his bones.

Harry remembered they'd found Johnson's body stripped of most of his muscles, the rats having devoured him as he lay dead in no man's land. They'd only been able to identify him by his tags.

Harry tried to avoid the rats, but there were too many, and they ran across his feet and up his mud-caked pants and across his face and Harry grabbed them and threw them away as he ran as fast as he could through the squelching mud.

Tom stood with his back turned towards Harry. "Look. The gas is coming."

All around them clouds of yellow gas drifted towards them through the November night and Harry reached for his gasmask only to realize at the last moment that the glass over an eye was cracked.

"Harry, put on your mask," Tom said, voice muted by his own gasmask.

Harry put on his cracked mask and hoped for the best and within minutes he started coughing and coughing as the mustard gas blistered his lungs.

"Harry?" Tom whispered, hands gently shaking Harry's shoulders. "Harry, are you all right?"

Harry looked around herself and realized with a shock they weren't in the trenches any longer. They weren't even in Bremen anymore.

They were standing on a campus of a university in Texas in the warm afternoon sun.

"Fuck," Harry said, and she felt like crying. "I'm so sorry, babe. I never should have asked that of you."

"What?" Tom wrinkled his brow in confusion. "Are you talking about the whole dying of the plague thing? I agreed to that, darling. It's fine." Tom stared down at Harry's apologetic face and sighed. "Harry, what did you do?"

“I’m so sorry, I really am,” Harry mumbled while her bottom lip trembled. “I gave you essence of deadly nightshade to end your suffering and then I infected myself so I could suffer as you did.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Tom shook his head while he released a loud sigh. “You fucking Gryffindor. I agreed to it. I wasn’t yet too sick that I couldn’t slice my own wrists if I wanted to, darling.”

Harry managed a weak chuckle. “Yeah, okay, you’ve got a point. And I barely was sick for long anyway before hallucinating and dying.”

Tom’s expression became utterly serious. “The trenches?”

Harry nodded. “The trenches.”

“Come on.” Tom slung his arm across Harry’s shoulders. “Let’s get some coffee. And some cake. I’m Jackson, by the way. Jackson Freeman.”

“Cho-Hee Park.” Harry wrapped her own arm around Tom’s waist, glad to put the traumas of any past lives behind them now that they had just started a brand new life together. “I’m doing veterinary medicine, again, by the way.”

“Me, too,” Tom said with a warm smile.

Harry was about to return it when something occurred to her. She stopped walking at once and stared up at Tom in utter horror. “Holy fuck, stick me back in the Middle Ages right now, plague and all.”

“What?” Tom looked at her in utter confusion.

Harry swallowed against her suddenly dry throat. “I just realized the amount of student debt I’m going to have by the time I graduate. Seriously, I’d rather do the plague again.”

“Fuck me.” Tom stared straight ahead in obvious horror. “We’ll both be paying for our education for the rest of our lives.”

And as it turned out, Tom was right. They did end up paying off their degrees for most of their lives, but that is a story for another time.

The end

Life # 158: that time Harry and Tom ran a funeral home.

Chapter Summary

Life # 158: that time Harry and Tom ran a funeral home.

Chapter Notes

Last night my mother passed away after a vicious fight with Covid-19, which she beat, only for her Alzheimer's to very unexpectantly come in and finish the job by progressing to the point of my mother not being able to talk and swallow and her subsequent death in less than a week. Apparently a secondary illness like Covid-19, a good bout of the flu or any type of infection can do that with Alzheimer's.

It's been an emotional roller coaster ride, as I'm sure you can imagine, so I decided to deal with this the only way I know how, and that is through writing.

So this one is for my mother, who was by no means a tyrant, but a flawed but good woman doing her best in life.

Life # 158: that time Harry and Tom ran a funeral home.

Auckland, New Zealand, 2009

"Why doesn't it get any easier?" Harry asked as he dabbed at his eyes with a tissue that was so soaked it was falling apart in his hands.

"Cancer is never easy," Tom said, crossing one leg over the other as she sat back on the bench in their garden that overlooked Curlew Bay in Auckland, offering a stunning view of the many city lights across the water now that the sun had just set. Right after they'd married Harry and Tom had bought the acre of land and spent the next year building a three bedroom ranch home with their own hands. Most of their family thought they were nuts, since even then the price for the land had been ridiculously high, but Harry and Tom had a pretty good idea what was going to happen with the housing prices in Auckland over the next twenty years, and indeed, after two decades they were living on what was essentially a goldmine. Not that they had any plans to move. They loved living there, but it was a nice little nest egg to have.

"Not cancer," Harry said with a quick glance at his wife before shaking his head. "I mean, yes, cancer never gets easy, I know, but I'm talking about losing a parent." Harry swallowed

and inhaled a deep breath. “Losing a mother.”

“Ah.” Tom gave Harry a look as though Harry had just said the silliest thing in the history of silly things. “She’s your mother. Of course you’re grieving when you lose her.”

Harry dabbed at his eyes again, tissue now mostly disintegrated. “I mean, I’ve lost mothers before, almost a hundred and fifty of them. I just expect it to be a little less...you know...”

“Painful?” Tom guessed with a knowing little smile.

“Yeah.” Harry rubbed against his chest. “Or a little less heart-breaking.”

Tom sighed. “I don’t know in how many different ways I have to tell you this, darling, but she was the woman who gave you life and who raised you. She was your mother.”

“She was a tyrant,” Harry muttered, feeling simultaneously incredibly annoyed with his mother and empty with immediate grief.

“Granted, she had a few things in common with the world’s most successful dictators,” Tom said smoothly, causing Harry to snort with amusement. “But in the end she was a good woman, who worked hard to raise you and your siblings and to turn her funeral home into a successful business.”

“Fuck, I’m going to miss her,” Harry sighed, while giving up on his disintegrated tissue and just rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Me too,” Tom said quietly, which Harry thought was very generous of Tom, seeing as how Harry’s mother had never thought Tom was good enough for her precious youngest son and had always been overly critical of her, which Tom had politely ignored for over two decades with the patience of a fucking saint. Harry’s mother had not been an easy woman to get along with, but Tom had worded it just right when he’d called her a good woman.

Tom turned a little to look at Harry. “Do you want Pat to get your mother ready tomorrow?”

Staring at Tom with wide eyes, Harry quickly shook his head. “Are you fucking kidding me? Have you met my mother at all during the past two decades? She’d come back from the dead if I let Pat touch her body. Pat’s not family.” Harry decidedly shook his head. “I’ll prepare her body for the *tangi*. We’ll take her to the *marae* first thing in the morning. My sister and aunts will now stay with her during the night.”

Harry and Tom were Maori, and Harry’s mother had started a funeral home that specialized in Maori rites. They also provided more westernized services, but they’d gained a great reputation within the Auckland Maori community and beyond.

Harry’s older brother and sister hadn’t been interested in following in their mother’s footsteps and joining the family business, but Harry, once he got his memories back in his late teens, had no problem being a funeral director, seeing as how he’d been a mortician in one of his earlier lives. And Tom, while she was able to perform all the practical tasks in the business,

did prefer to stick with the business side of things. Harry didn't mind getting hands on with the dead, even if one of them was his own mother.

"We get to be loved," Tom said out of the blue.

Harry sat up a little to look at her. "Huh?"

"That's what makes all of this worth it," Tom said with a small but knowing smile. "Every life, we get to be loved by lots of people. Parents, grandparents, siblings, children. And we get to love them in return."

Staring straight ahead into the darkness ahead of them, Harry mulled this over. It was true enough. While in a rare few lives they were stuck with abusive relatives, for the most part they had good families. By no means were their many parents and siblings and children that they'd had over the many, many lives perfect, but they were generally good people trying hard to do right by their loved ones.

And honestly, that was all anyone could do with their lives in the end.

"And to lose that hurts," Tom concluded quietly.

"The cost of love is loss," Harry agreed with a small nod. This wasn't the first time they'd had a conversation like this one, but every now and again losing a loved one really hit one of them badly and they had to have a little talk again to help settle their emotions.

"Dad?"

Harry turned around on the bench to see their eldest son Robbie lurking near the backdoor. Robbie was seventeen, almost eighteen, and he had made a sport of lurking about the place with the world's most disinterested expression on his face. "Yeah, Rob?"

Robbie shuffled closer to the bench, his younger brother Pete slinking after him like a weary feral cat. Pete, who had just turned fifteen, had recently started acting like he was the world's most unique snowflake and no one understood him and his suffering.

Ah, puberty. It never got old.

Robbie stopped in front of the bench and as one Harry and Tom moved apart, making room for their sons. Thankfully, for once their boys didn't need more of an invitation to join in a family activity and they both sat down between their parents.

"Dad," Robbie said softly, staring down at his folded hands in his lap. "Are you preparing Nan tomorrow?"

"Yep, first thing in the morning," Harry said, wondering where this conversation was going. Neither of their boys had shown much emotion yet at the news of their Nan's passing. And while Harry's mother had been a bit of a tyrant in her business, she'd been an absolute sweetheart of a grandmother, spoiling her grandchildren rotten while berating her children for not taking better care of her precious grand-babies.

“Could I...I dunno...be there?” Robbie all but whispered.

Harry almost fell backwards off the bench in sheer shock. So far, Robbie had never, ever shown any interest in the family business, and while Harry would love for one of his sons to follow in his footsteps, he wasn't about to force his kids to choose a career they didn't enjoy.

Clearing his throat, Harry nodded, his eyes welling up a bit again. “Sure. I'm getting her ready at first light and then we'll take her to the *marae*. Your Nan would be happy to have you help get her ready.” Gently, Harry placed his hand on Robbie's knee and gave it a few pats, and will wonders never cease, Robbie didn't pull away.

Pete, meanwhile, was leaning against Tom who was running her fingers through their youngest son's hair while she whispered in his ear.

Harry was tempted beyond belief to make a smart remark about their sons' out of character behaviour but decided against doing so, not wanting to ruin the moment.

“We got to love her,” Harry heard Tom whisper to Pete. “And we got to be loved by her.”

Harry firmly closed his mouth as not to point out his mother had done many things in her life, but loving Tom had never been one of them.

Not the time.

Tom caught Harry's gaze over the tops of their childrens' heads and they shared a knowing smile while Tom mouthed, “Worth it.”

And yeah, despite the puberty and the tyrant mothers and the heart-break, in the end it was worth it, time and again.

Life # 184: That time Harry and Tom accidentally ended the British monarchy

Chapter Summary

Life # 184: That time Harry and Tom accidentally ended the British monarchy

Chapter Notes

I started this life sometime last year, after watching the latest season of The Crown. Such a great show, and it inspired me to make Harry and Tom royalty in one of their lives.

Anyway, in my quest to update all my WIPs I remembered that there were a couple of short stories about some of Harry and Tom's previous lives that I had started and I'm going to try and finish them. This is one of them.

I hope you'll enjoy it. Thanks for reading! Let me know what you think. Your comments always make my day.

Life # 184: That time Harry and Tom accidentally ended the British monarchy

London, UK, August 1971

“This can’t be happening,” Harry groaned, bent over in his chair, head between his knees, on the verge of hyperventilation. “I cannot be the Prince of Wales.”

“Sorry to disappoint, darling,” Tom said, tone stuck somewhere between clear amusement and abject horror. “But you are currently the heir to the British throne.” Tom swallowed audibly. “And I’m the woman you’re not allowed to marry.”

“Fuck that.” Harry whipped his head up, giving Tom his most determined look. “I am marrying you, no matter what anyone says.”

“We should plan this carefully.” Tom sat down on Harry’s knee and frowned in concentration. “Andrew’s broken up with me to pursue your sister.”

“My brother?”

Tom gave Harry a disbelieving look. “Andrew Parker Bowles. The man Camilla marries in other worlds.”

“Don’t give me that look,” Harry muttered, still barely able to breathe normally. He was suddenly royalty, of the House of Windsor, no less. In just about any world the UK had a monarchy (though there were a handful of worlds where for some reason or another the monarchy had been abolished at some point in the past), but it wasn’t always the House of Windsor who ruled. There had been at least five other royal Houses that regularly ended up on the British throne in more than one world. And now Harry was part of the whole circus. “I’ve never paid that much attention to any of the British monarchies. I thought Parker Bowles was your name.”

“No, I’m Camilla Shand currently.”

“Well, Camilla Shand,” Harry said, now with obvious humour in his voice. “I do plan to marry you no matter what anyone says, but you’re right. We really need a plan.”

“From what I remember most people thought me unsuitable to be your wife because I’m too common.”

“Wait, really?” Harry stared at Tom with wide eyes. “It’s the seventies, you’d think people had gotten over those silly notions.”

“The Shands are gentry, but not nobility.” Tom shrugged and ran a hand through her long, blonde hair. “And I do believe several people already have plans to marry you off to people of their choosing.”

“Who?” Harry demanded, feeling his temper rise at the idea of people trying to marry him off behind his own back.

“Lord Mountbatten wants you to marry his granddaughter, and your grandmother, The Queen Mother, wants you to marry one of the Spencer granddaughters, because she’s good friends with their grandmother, Lady Fermoy, if I recall correctly,” Tom explained while smoothing a hand up and down Harry’s arm to calm him down.

“Spencer? Isn’t that Diana’s maiden name?”

“Yes.”

Harry vigorously shook his head. He may not know a great many details about any of the British monarchies they’d encountered but even he knew about Prince Charles and Princess Diana and their wreckage of a relationship. “I’m not marrying her. In every fucking world we’ve lived in where Charles married Diana it ended in disaster for everyone involved.”

“They might not give you a choice,” Tom quietly pointed out.

“They can’t force me,” Harry countered immediately. “The worst they can do is strip away my titles and kick me out of the family. And let’s be real. My mother, Queen Elizabeth, lives to be almost a 100 in just about any world she exists in. By the time I’m up to take over as

King I'll be almost eighty years old. You expect me to lead a miserable life with an unhappy marriage to someone I don't love they choose for me so I can be King for a few years by the time I should be well and truly retired?"

"When you put it like that," Tom said with a quiet chuckle. "Yes, staying part of the Royal Family doesn't seem worth the cost. Still, they haven't kicked you out just yet. If we play this right we might be able to persuade enough people to allow our marriage and you won't have to turn your back on your family."

Harry stared at Tom with wide eyes. "They are such a dysfunctional family, babe, you have no idea. Besides, my sister would be an amazing Queen. She's down to earth and an enormously hard worker."

"Except Anne won't be Queen in your stead, darling," Tom said, much to Harry's surprise. "As long as there are sons, daughters are passed over for ruling in this country."

"Wait...that means Andrew would be the next Prince of Wales and heir to the throne." Harry's mouth sank open in shock at that thought.

"The rapist, yes," Tom agreed with a wrinkle of her nose in obvious distaste. In just about every world they'd lived in where the Windsors ruled, Prince Andrew had ended up a scoundrel who liked to have sex with underage girls, which amounted to statutory rape at the very least. Harry and Tom had both been raped in more than a few lives and had no sympathy for rapists of any kind.

"Well," Harry said with a deep sigh after he finally managed to close his mouth. "Let's hope the family doesn't kick me out because I'm not sure the monarchy could survive having Andrew as the next in line for the throne."

"We'll see." Tom got up and stretched while she walked around the spare bedroom of their friend, where they were hiding out after they both got their memories back upon meeting and Harry just about fainted from shock. "I suggest we start building wealth of our own now, so we can be sure to have a nicely filled bank account just in case we do need to make it on our own in a few years."

"Yeah." Harry got up as well and rubbed a hand across his face. "If I do have to break with my family I do not want to be dependent on them for anything, especially not money. The last thing I'd want is for them to be able to dangle the Civil List over my head, threatening to take away my income if I don't do as I'm told."

"Right." Tom stopped in front of Harry and smiled up at him. "We'll launch a few products to sell through an investor and then buy stock from companies we know will probably do well in the next few decades."

"Sounds like a plan." Harry thought for a second. "How about in a few years we look up Bill Gates and tell him we'd like to invest in his new computer company?"

Tom laughed outright and then wound her arms around Harry's torso in a firm hug. "We'll be fine."

For the next two years Harry and Tom worked their behinds off to set up their futures in a way that would benefit them both. They did quietly sell a few technological designs through investors, which earned them a pretty penny once sales started. And they both took money from their own bank accounts and bought stock in a variety of businesses they were certain would earn significant profits in the years to come. They'd done that in so many lifetimes already it was routine by then. Everything was done in Tom's name, though, since Harry, as a full-time royal, wasn't allowed to earn an outside income. Tom was, though, and Harry trusted his soulmate completely, so he happily diverted some of his own funds to Tom, so she could invest for them both.

And even more importantly, they started dating officially. Tom never did get back with Andrew Parker Bowles, even if he did ask her to rekindle their relationship after his attempt at wooing Princess Anne fell through.

Whenever Harry wasn't travelling overseas with the Navy, Harry and Tom spent all their free time together and visited many equestrian events as a couple, often while Harry played polo and Tom cheered him on from the audience. They also spent a significant amount of time networking amongst their peers during parties and hunting events, cultivating relationships they might need should Harry be forced to break with his family.

Everyone in their social circle seemed to accept they were a couple and in public they always made sure to behave appropriately so no one could accuse them of causing a scandal or bringing shame to the Royal Family or something silly like that. Whenever the press asked Harry about all the time he spent with Camilla Shand, he smiled and told them they were very dear friends, since he couldn't really go public with their relationship until his family approved it.

And they didn't quite approve of it. They also didn't disapprove of it. Mostly, they seemed to think Harry was just fooling around with this common girl and thus ignored it, firm in their belief one day Harry would realize he needed to marry and would choose a suitable woman of nobility to make the Princess of Wales.

It was decidedly odd to be a celebrity of such renown. Yes, both Harry and Tom had been celebrities before in their own right many times. Sometimes even pretty huge celebrities, known the world over. Tom had been President of the USA one time, and Harry the First Husband, so they knew what it was like to be in the public's eye on a global scale.

But they'd never been people Harry and Tom had known as celebrities in other worlds before. When Tom was the US President, he wasn't JFK or Lincoln or Clinton. He was a man named Fred Tillman, who became the President after serving as the Governor of New York for eight years.

Now, for the first few months after they got their memories back, every time Harry looked in the mirror he came close to hyperventilating. Thankfully it wasn't difficult to act like Charles, because this version of Charles was Harry in essence, even before the return of his memories. Charles liked horses and dogs and playing polo and stalking and hunting. Charles was interested in organic agriculture and gardening. Charles was thinking of starting his own trust to aid in all the charity work he wanted to do after his stint in the military was over. All these were things that were born straight from Harry's own interests.

It was still downright bizarre, though, to have dinner with his parents the first time after Harry got his memories back. These were Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, holy cow! And now they were also Mother and Father.

Well, in theory they were Harry's Mum and Dad, but in reality his relationship with his parents was rather strained and cold. Prince Philip expected his son to be far less emotional than Harry was, and while Queen Elizabeth made for a hard-working and dedicated sovereign, she'd always been a distant mother, at least to Harry.

All this made it rather easy for Harry to make up his mind, that should his family not accept his choice of future wife, he'd have no qualms breaking with them. Harry was too old to get stuck in an unhappy life for the sake of others' unfair expectations, even if those other people were royalty.

Right before Harry got ready to announce his relationship and planned engagement with Tom in 1973, he was suddenly shipped off with the navy to spend time abroad for six months. Harry could sense Lord Mountbatten's hand in this, and probably his grandmother's, since suddenly back home Tom got pressured into marrying Andrew Parker Bowles, who Tom hadn't been in a relationship with since 1971, and Harry received a letter from Lord Mountbatten suggesting he might want to consider his granddaughter (Harry's cousin!) as a future wife.

Harry politely declined, and so did Tom.

It all came to a head in 1974, when Harry got summoned to Buckingham Palace where he was met with just about his entire immediate family. Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip, The Queen Mother, Lord Mountbatten, Princess Margaret, and Princess Anne.

"Oh, you're all here?" Harry asked, acting like he didn't have a clue why he was summoned. "Good, that way I can share my happy news with you all at once. I've proposed to Camilla, and she's accepted."

Dead silence greeted his announcement while Harry sank down in a chair, smile firmly on his face while he inwardly rolled his eyes at the absurdity that was his current family.

Finally, Margaret snorted, took a swig of wine and lit another cigarette. It was one of the few things Harry despised about living in the 20th century. Everyone still smoked everywhere. Ever since Harry had been a chain smoker in his second life and died of lung cancer he'd been firmly opposed to tobacco and hated having to put up with cigarette smoke everywhere in that day and age.

"Yes," his mother said, brushing imaginary dirt off her skirt. "It appears you've forgotten you're heir to the throne and choosing a wife is a little more involved than you simply proposing to whomever you wish."

"Oh?" Harry feigned confusion while he stared at his mother with a tilt of his head.

"Come now," Lord Mountbatten grumbled. "Charles, you must be aware Camilla Shand is not a suitable candidate for the future Queen of this great nation."

“I assure you, she is,” Harry said in a most agreeable tone. “She’s smart, talented, caring and determined. She’ll make a fine Queen to the nation one day.”

“There are far better candidates out there,” his mother insisted.

“Perhaps,” Harry replied with a shrug. “But none I want to marry and start a family with. Camilla is the person I’m going to marry, with or without your approval.”

“You cannot be serious,” his mother asked in obvious shock.

“You are being terribly immature about this,” Lord Mountbatten said with a narrow-eyed look of disapproval.

“Is this an attempt at blackmail?” his father asked brusquely.

“Not at all.” Harry paused and looked around the room at everyone’s shocked faces. “This is merely an announcement. I am going to marry Camilla, that is a certainty. How you react to that is ultimately up to you. I’ll accept whatever consequences happen either way.”

“Parliament won’t accept the Crown Prince marrying a commoner,” his grandmother said, while everyone else was still processing Harry’s ultimatum.

“I believe they will, as long as the Royal Family supports the union,” Harry said, secretly enjoying the whole dramatic show in front of him. He hadn’t been lying when he said he was going to marry Tom and accept the consequences, whatever they were. Not being the Crown Prince might even make his life easier. “We live in modern times now. I do believe marrying a common girl will be welcomed by our nation.”

The Queen was sitting utterly still, her back rigid. Harry realized she was spitting mad but too well-mannered to show it. “You dare threaten us with your choice of future wife?”

“I never threatened –“

“You said you would accept whatever consequences came your way,” his mother talked over him with a flinty glare. “The consequences for the heir to the throne to marry someone without official approval is to give up their right to the throne. You know what this did to this family when it happened to my uncle and my father was unexpectedly made King.”

“I am not your uncle,” Harry said, suddenly sounding quite frosty as he glared back at his mother. “For one, I am not a Nazi sympathizer, I assure you. And for another, Camilla isn’t an American divorcee. She’s a fine, well-educated English woman with a good reputation who I’ve been dating for three years now.”

“She’s entirely unsuitable,” his mother insisted.

“How would you know?” Harry asked in a loud voice, finally losing some of his cool. “You’ve never even formally met her, even when you knew I was seriously dating her. You’ve never invited her over for a visit here or at Balmoral to get to know her.”

“We don’t have to meet someone to know they’re too common,” his grandmother said with a frankly condescending chuckle.

Harry got up from his chair and glanced around the room. “I’ve said what I needed to say. The rest is up to you. I’ll await your answer patiently.”

“Now see here,” Lord Mountbatten said, but Harry turned his back to his family and marched out the room. His sister Anne came hurrying after him.

“Charles, wait.” Anne gave him a disbelieving look when Harry stopped in the hallway to talk to her. “Think about what you’re doing. You could lose everything.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong,” Harry said with a smile. “If I don’t marry Camilla, I would lose everything. She’s the most important thing in my life.”

“But your duty…”

“I would happily do my duty to this country, Anne, but I ask for one thing in return.” Harry held up a finger while he gave his sister a sad smile. “Just one. That I’m allowed to marry and spend the rest of my life with the woman I love. If they can’t even give me that, then I cannot give them my entire life, simple as that.”

Anne sighed while she bowed her head. “Camilla has a certain…reputation.”

“Please explain.”

“She’s been with others.”

Harry snorted. “You mean, she dated Parker Bowles for a few years before he broke up with her to chase after you, and she’s been with me exclusively ever since. That’s it.”

“Yes, but it still means she has a reputation.”

Harry nodded his head knowingly. “Meaning, she’s not a young virgin barely out of her teens and therefore not suitable. Well, I happen to disagree, end of story.”

Anne looked like she couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing. “Would you really give all of this up?”

“For the love of my life? In a heartbeat.” Harry made to walk on, but glanced at his sister over his shoulder for a moment more. “Wouldn’t you?”

And with that, Harry left Buckingham Palace knowing he’d stated his case and the ball was now in his family’s court. He told his driver to head back to Camilla’s home in Sussex. It was unofficially their home, since Harry spent all his free time there. Ever since some of their investments started paying off Tom rented a small country house from a great-aunt who no longer used it in her old age. It was slightly outdated but comfortable and private and depending on how their future went Tom and Harry even were considering buying the estate outright since they enjoyed living there.

Over the next year, Harry's family tried to persuade him to give up his plans of marrying Camilla Shand while Harry remained politely determined about his choice of wife. It all came to an end in November of 1975 when Harry received a summons from Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip to meet them at Buckingham palace.

"Charles, this has gone on long enough," his mother said with a frosty look. "Parliament will never accept Camilla Shand as the future Queen of this nation." Elizabeth's expression softened somewhat. "I've asked people I trust, Charles. I've put out some feelers, but all I got in return was a resounding rejection."

Harry nodded while he sat across from his parents in one of the smaller reception rooms. It was just the three of them and somehow this made Harry a bit more emotional than if he'd faced his entire family.

"Be a man," his father said brusquely. "Marry a suitable woman and make Parliament and this country happy and no one will care who you see on the side."

"I would care," Harry said honestly. "I love Camilla far too much to treat her as a side piece, end of story."

Queen Elizabeth slowly closed her eyes and sighed. "Is there no changing your mind on this matter?"

"None," Harry said in a voice full of confidence. Then he added, in a much softer tone, "I truly am sorry, Mother. I wish things were differently."

"So do I," his mother whispered, sounding just a bit broken-hearted. Then she sat up a little and looked like the Queen she was. "I shall petition Parliament in your name and ask for their permission for your marriage to Camilla Shand."

"Thank you, Mother." Harry's smile was utterly sincere, even in the face of Philip's unimpressed look. His father had never understood Harry's more emotional side.

As it turned out, Elizabeth had been right and Harry had been wrong.

Parliament did not give permission for the Prince of Wales to marry Camilla Shand.

"Fuck," Harry said, head in his hands. He and Tom were seated in their living room in their country house in Sussex. "Fucking hell. I'd honestly thought the times were modern enough. It's almost 1976, for fuck's sake."

"People have lobbied against it," Tom pointed out, rubbing her hand across Harry's back in soothing circles. "Perhaps even members of your own family."

Harry nodded. He could very well imagine Lord Mountbatten or even his grandmother, the Queen Mother, whispering in all the right ears that Parliament should reject Harry's choice of wife. Those two seemed awfully determined to see Harry marry someone that met their ridiculous standards instead of the woman he loved.

The conversation Harry had with his parents, his aunt and his sister the following week was one of the most difficult ones he'd had in many previous lifetimes.

"Charles, please," Princess Anne all but begged him. "Don't do this."

His mother showed no emotion whatsoever, her face a blank mask while his father stood in the corner of the room, quietly muttering curse words. His aunt, Princess Margaret was sipping a glass of wine and puffing on a cigarette while she watched the whole thing as though she hadn't been this entertained in a long time.

"Mother," Harry said with a deep sigh. "I abdicate my right to the throne. I relinquish all my titles. I am royalty no longer."

"It shall be done," his mother said, voice giving nothing away but her eyes shimmered suspiciously.

"For what it's worth, I am truly sorry," Harry whispered. And he was. He'd have happily stayed part of the Crown but there was just no way he was giving up Tom, not even for a throne. "I shall require no financial aid from the family at any point in the future. You may remove me from the Civil List."

"What?" Anne asked, eyes wide. "How will you live?"

Harry shrugged and gave his sister an even look. "Camilla has been making some very wise investments. We've got more than enough to live on for many years to come. We'll be fine."

"You're happy to let a *woman* support you?" Philip all but growled. Immediately all women in the room looked at him with raised eyebrows. Philip looked down, apparently understanding such old-fashioned ideas were no longer welcome in his immediate family.

Harry gave his father a disbelieving look. "As opposed to the tax payers of this country? Yes, I'll gladly let my fiancée make some investments, and soon enough we'll run our businesses together, like the equals that we are."

"You're choosing love," Princess Margaret said while raising her glass of wine at Harry. "Good on you, Charles. I still regret not doing the same." And with that she emptied her glass in one gulp while the Queen studiously avoided her sister's knowing gaze.

The press had a field day with the news once it broke. The Crown Prince who chose a common girl over the throne made headlines for weeks and months all over the world.

Thankfully, Harry and Tom were prepared, at least financially. Even though they hadn't been commanded to do so, it was understood that it would be better if they left the country. They bought a small estate in the Netherlands, which was close to the UK and the kind of no-nonsense country that Harry and Tom liked. They'd lived there before and spoke the language. And from Amsterdam they could fly anywhere in the world to meet with people and grow their business empire.

They invested in more companies that they suspected would do well in the future. They met George Lucas and invested in Industrial Light and Magic. They bought stock in Sony and Disney, and they invested in Apple when it started up. And since they were part-owners of Microsoft, they were pretty much set to become billionaires at some point in their lives.

A year after Harry abdicated his right to the throne, he and Tom got married in a private ceremony on their country estate in the Netherlands. They had over 200 guests, all friends and business associates, and of course Camilla's family. Anne and Margaret were there to represent Harry's family and he was grateful they'd come.

Since his abdication, Harry was named Charles Mountbatten-Windsor, and now Tom chose to use that name as well.

Within the year they were pregnant because Tom wanted babies. "We're filthy rich and we live in a stable, modern country. I want at least three children," Tom all but demanded on their wedding night. Harry happily obliged because he loved having kids with Tom. They spent their honeymoon on the Maldives doing their very best to make their first child.

Their oldest child, a daughter they named Heather, was born in 1978. Within the next five years they had two sons which they named Oliver and Bertie and that's when they decided their family was complete.

Meanwhile, the Crown had taken a bit of a beating ever since Harry abdicated. The public saw how happy Harry was with his new, beautiful family, and how successful he and Tom were in their businesses. And how generous they shared their wealth ever since starting their non-profit organizations that provided financial aid and job opportunities for the poor, and free vaccines and health care for the people in developing nations, among other things.

Not to mention that Harry and Tom authored a book detailing the reasons they chose to leave the Royal Family and how their lives together had grown from a simple infatuation into a strong, loving marriage. It was on the bestseller lists around the world for months and months, and Harry and Tom donated all of the proceedings from that book to charities around the world to help the less fortunate.

The public finally got the idea they'd lost a perfectly fine Crown Prince, especially when Andrew grew up to gain a reputation of a bit of a scoundrel and a philanderer. The Royal Family needed to take action to save their reputation and their future. Harry hoped they would simply change the laws and make Anne next in line for the throne, since she would one day make an amazing queen.

But no, instead the Crown chose to pretty much force the new Prince of Wales to get married. To Diana Spencer.

"Oh, that poor, poor woman," Tom muttered over breakfast while reading the paper. "She has no idea what she's getting into."

"Things will be different," Harry said while giving Tom a look full of hope he didn't genuinely feel. "She might actually live a long and happy life this time around."

The wedding of Andrew and Diana was easily as popular as the wedding of Charles and Diana had been in previous lives. Perhaps even more popular because Andrew was a far more charismatic figure than Charles had ever been. Andrew and Diana became insanely loved and cherished overnight the world over and pretty much saved the monarchy. For now.

Harry and Tom hardly cared and simply led their own lives. Harry kept in touch with Anne and Margaret, and his mother and father did come to visit them a few times to meet their grandchildren but their relationship with their son and daughter-in-law would never become particularly close or loving.

“I wish I was a princess, like Aunt Anne,” Heather said once when she was almost six. “Or a queen, like grandmother.”

“No, you don’t,” Tom said with a chuckle and then gave their daughter an age-appropriate wakeup call about the realities of being royalty. She told their daughter a lovely fairy tale about the Prince who fell in love with a beautiful girl of a common background and then a whole bunch of old men said they couldn’t get married. So they had to pretty much flee the country so they could live happily ever after. Heather never wanted to be a princess again after that.

Since they were doing so well financially, Harry and Tom could pretty much afford any hobby they wanted and that became dressage. They both loved riding horses and kept several for that purpose and Tom really got into dressage through a friend of hers. One thing led to another, and Tom bought a perfectly bred dressage horse and started joining competitions, eventually making it as far as European Champion and ranking second in the World Championships. They expanded their stables on their estate and started breeding dressage horses, which took up most of their time.

Both Heather and Bertie took an interest in dressage as well, while Oliver preferred to simply ride for fun while immersing himself in technology and computers as a hobby.

When Prince William and Princess Beatrice were born, the popularity of Andrew and Diana skyrocketed, but Harry and Tom could see, through their constant appearances in the media, that their marriage was cracking at the seams.

“Diana, that poor thing, is losing far too much weight,” Tom muttered, staring at several photos in one of the tabloids she liked to pretend she didn’t read. “Her eating disorder must be at its peak right now.”

“I can only imagine how stressful it must be to be married to Andrew,” Harry mumbled in response while he stirred a pot of pasta sauce. “That man probably cheated on her during the honeymoon if he was given the chance.”

Within three years Andrew and Diana were unofficially separated, a year after that the separation was made official and another three years down the line they divorced.

And Diana did not keep her mouth shut about why she’d ended their marriage. Basically, Andrew couldn’t keep it in his trousers and had far too many shady friends who enjoyed organizing sex parties and Diana was having none of that.

“Good for her,” Tom muttered while reading yet another interview in the paper over breakfast. “Tell it how it is, girl.”

The popularity of the Royal Family plummeted. Harry and Tom simply sat back and watched the show while they lived happy, comfortable lives in the Netherlands. They had several houses and properties around the world and they loved to travel, but ultimately they had found their home in that small little country that was happy to have them and left them alone for the most part.

In 1997, at the age of 19, their daughter Heather won the dressage European Championship on a horse bred by her parents named Magical Bonfire. Harry and Tom were right there in the arena, naturally, and couldn't have been more proud of their daughter. Their son Bertie, who was a few years younger, was also doing exceptionally well in the Junior dressage competitions. The tabloids in the UK had a field day posting pictures of Harry, Tom and Heather together celebrating their success, side by side of some very unflattering pictures of Andrew drunk at some party or another. They added headlines such as: LIZ, YOU THREW AWAY THE WRONG SON

Tom couldn't stop laughing for hours when she saw the paper that morning. “Those hypocritical cunts,” Tom said while cackling madly. “They're conveniently forgetting that it was Parliament, also known as the representatives of the people of Britain, who ultimately axed our marriage. Your mother, however reluctantly, agreed to it by the end.”

Harry nodded in agreement. As much as his mother had been a pain in the behind about this whole thing, she had eventually agreed. Though Harry wouldn't put it past her that she only agreed to his face because she was absolutely certain Parliament would put a halt to the wedding anyway. He could very well see the Queen Mother and Lord Mountbatten whispering in his mother's ears that if she played it like that, Harry would eventually concede to their wishes and marry a proper bride of their choosing. If there was one thing Harry had learned about royalty over his many lifetimes it was that most of them were backstabbing bastards who would stop at nothing to get their way.

At the end of August in 1997, Tom made a phone call. “I just made a bomb threat, just so you know,” Tom said while pouring them both cups of coffee in their kitchen.

“Excuse me?” Harry said, lowering the paper and giving his wife a wide-eyed look.

“To a certain hotel in Paris,” Tom said with a shrug. “Perhaps if Diana doesn't stay there as long, their chauffeur won't be drunk.” When Harry looked at her in shock, Tom crossed her arms and added, “that woman deserves better, Harry. You know it.”

“I do believe she deserves better,” Harry said quickly, holding up a hand. “I'm just astonished you remembered the exact date and location of this whole mess.”

“And I'm astonished that you don't,” Tom said in a snooty tone.

Diana and Dodi did not die that night, nor any night thereafter for many more years to come. Their relationship didn't last for more than a year and eventually Diana got back together with a doctor she'd been seeing in secret a few years prior. They married in 2000 and as far

as anyone knew their marriage was a happy one. Meanwhile the popularity of the Royal Family kept plummeting with each new scandal Andrew was involved in, and there were plenty of those to go around.

In 2006 it all came to an end for the Royal Family. Jeffrey Epstein faced charges and instead of it being buried under the rug, this time everything was yanked out into the open because the British Crown Prince was involved. The merciless tabloids smelled blood and like sharks in the water they circled around the bleeding prey, biting chunks out of it until nothing remained.

More than one girl came forward with stories of how Andrew had fucked them while they were still underage and there was no putting that devil back in its box once it sprung free. No amount of PR could save the Royal Family after that big of a scandal, that their Crown Prince turned out to be a rapist of underage girls. Even if Andrew never got convicted in a court of law (the coward settled with the victims instead), he was quickly convicted by the public and support for the Royal Family was at an all time low.

The opposition in Parliament quickly took advantage of that and demanded a referendum and eventually the British people voted in favour of abolishing the Crown with a majority of 61 percent.

“I never would have guessed this would happen after I gave up the throne,” Harry said, sitting on the terrace of their home while they watched a few of their grandchildren play with their two golden retrievers.

“Serves them right,” Tom muttered with a vindictive little sneer. “They were an obsolete institution anyway.”

“You’re just pissed off they took away your chance of ever becoming a real queen,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“Pfft.” Tom gestured at the lovely scene before them, of dogs and children chasing each other. “Our lives have turned out so much better than they would have if we’d stayed part of your family, dear.”

“You’ll hear no argument there,” Harry agreed with a chuckle. “I do feel bad for my mother. She’s dedicated so much of her life to her job.”

“And now she can retire, like any other person on this planet does when they’re eighty years old.” Tom narrowed her eyes at Harry. “And she’ll be fine. She’s rich as fuck and she owns Balmoral and other estates. It’s not as though she’ll be living in a cardboard box somewhere.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry said with a sigh. He still felt bad since he knew how much this had to hurt his mother. “I think I’ll give her a call anyway.”

“You do that.” Tom went back to reading her paper while their dogs barked and their grandchildren screeched in joy.

Harry sat back and smiled. Yeah, he did not regret giving up the throne for even one second because the life they'd actually lived this time around had been a great one and it wasn't even over.

Life # 143 That time Tom and Harry were A-list actors

Chapter Notes

Tom and Harry are inspired by real life actors in this story, though they're very much fictional versions of these people. It shouldn't be too hard to figure out who they are.

Don't ask where this idea or pairing came from because I honestly have no idea. I wanted to write a Hollywood story for Tom and Harry and this is what happened. My mind works in mysterious ways.

I hope you'll enjoy the story. Let me know what you think! Your comments keep me coming back to my stories no matter how much time passes.

Life # 143 That time Tom and Harry were A-list actors

London, UK, 2014

They met at the premiere of a movie Harry had a small, supporting part in. Tom had worked with the director in his breakout role some years prior, so naturally he was invited to the premiere of the director's latest project. They literally bumped into each other during the party after everyone had seen the movie.

"Hi," Harry said, mind still reeling as he stared at Tom with wide eyes. This wasn't the first time they were celebrities by any means, but this was the first time that Tom was wearing the body of a very talented and desirable A-list actor who just about the whole planet seemed to lust after in some capacity or another.

"Nice to meet you," Tom said, quickly recovering from the shock of getting his memories back and acutely aware they were surrounded by hundreds of people and thus had to keep up appearances at least for a while. "Sorry, mate, but I didn't catch your name."

"Tim," Harry said with a sheepish smile. "Or Timmy, whatever you want."

"It was a great movie," Tom said as he sipped his drink. "Your performance was more than solid."

Snorting, Harry gave a careless shrug. "Sure, for all three minutes that I was in it."

"It was at least five minutes," Tom said with a grin and then nodded knowingly. "Small parts like that can get you noticed, though, so don't discount them."

"Oh no," Harry said quickly with a vigorous shake of his head. "That's not how I meant it. This is my first part in a big production and being a part of it felt so... epic that I hadn't

realized how small my part actually was.”

While they were chatting they had slowly but surely manoeuvred through the crowd to a more secluded corner of the room for a bit more privacy. “How old are you?” Harry asked urgently when they were no longer surrounded by people on all sides.

“I’m 37,” Tom whispered. “You?”

Harry swallowed. “I’m 19.”

“Bugger.” Tom pursed his lips and stared down at his shoes. “We’re going to have to play this very carefully if we don’t want to mess up our careers.”

“Yeah,” Harry said in complete agreement. Not only were they both men, but there was also a significant age difference. Marrying someone your own gender was still not fully accepted for A-list stars like Tom was at that moment, especially not if his spouse was still a teenager. “I suggest we hold off any official relationship for at least a few years. Perhaps start with a friendship that’s slowly made public and which can then evolve into a romantic relationship.”

“We could easily make something like that work. I’ve got a couple of big projects lined up, so I don’t have time for a relationship anyway.” Tom gave Harry a curious look. “You’ve got anything interesting coming up?”

Harry heaved a deep sigh. “Yeah, maybe. A starring role in a small project but they’re having trouble getting financing. Other than that, nothing, but I’m hoping I’ll get some good publicity from this movie.”

“It really is a good movie so you’re bound to get offered something new,” Tom said optimistically, but unfortunately, for once he was wrong.

For months nothing happened for Harry and his blossoming acting career. He got so bored doing nothing he ended up writing a few scripts. One a dark comedy about a dysfunctional family, one a psychological thriller about a serial killer and one a straight up horror story about a demonic possession.

Harry’s agent gave him a very peculiar look when Harry handed her three completed scripts during their next meeting.

“You’ve got hidden talents,” his agent said as she paged through the first script. “I don’t usually sell scripts but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks. Any parts I can play coming up?” Harry asked with a hopeful smile.

“They’re casting Spider-man,” his agent said with feigned nonchalance. “You interested?”

Harry bounced in his seat. “Fuck yeah!”

“Did you get Spidey?” Tom asked two months later during their daily telephone call. They both had bought additional phones specifically to keep in touch with each other. No one else

had that number since tabloid journalists were known to hack known phone numbers from celebrities like Tom and they couldn't risk their conversations and chat logs becoming public.

Harry dropped himself down on his bed and released a deep sigh. "I made it to the last four I believe but the kid they eventually cast is really athletic and apparently did a whole bunch of backflips during his audition. Fucking hell, I can't do a backflip to save my life. I'm just not athletic in this body. Like at all."

Tom chuckled, his hoarse voice sending shivers down Harry's back. "But you are ridiculously handsome, though, so there's that."

Harry's cheeks heated before he even knew what was happening. Lots of people had told him he was handsome during his current life, but that usually didn't have such an effect on him. "Ugh, your voice does things to me."

Tom purposefully deepened his voice even more. "Really? Do tell."

"I'm not having phone sex with you right now," Harry grumbled though his body certainly seemed interested in that prospect. "I'm still mentally recovering from getting rejected for Spidey." Harry shot up once he remembered something important. "Oh, I did get word that I've got a supporting part in an independent movie that starts shooting soon."

"Nice. I'm happy for you," Tom said with obvious warmth in his voice. "I'm also pretty sure you've got ADHD coming out of your ears."

"Huh?" Harry blinked as he stared across his empty bedroom. That was not at all what he'd expected Tom to say to him anytime soon.

"Think about it," Tom insisted. "You wrote three complete scripts in three months because you were bored. You fall over your own feet more often than not. You are incapable of sitting still. You constantly complain you cannot plan anything. And once you start talking it's impossible to shut you up."

"You know," Harry said after a few moments of silence as he thought back to his entire life so far. "That would explain a lot."

Because Tom was usually right about such things, Harry sought out a psychologist who specialized in neurodiversity and three months later he had a shiny new ADHD diagnosis, just in time for his supporting role in a small, independent movie. While the movie didn't attract much attention from the general public, Harry's performance got exceptional praise from most critics.

And then Tom got an Oscar nomination.

"It's just for supporting actor," Tom said over the phone when Harry spent at least ten minutes gushing about it. "Not to mention I fucking earned that. I spent months in the mud and the snow during that shoot."

“That was so worth it,” Harry all but yelled. “That was one of the most beautiful movies I’ve ever seen. Seriously. Every shot in that movie gave me a cinematic boner.”

“You’re a teenager,” Tom said with a loud snort. “Everything gives you a boner.”

“Hey!” Harry was tempted to give his phone an affronted look. “I’m 21 now, I’ll have you know.”

“So you’re finally able to legally buy alcohol in your country of origin. Congrats,” Tom said with no small amount of sarcasm colouring his voice.

Harry decided to ignore his soulmate because he just remembered something rather important. “Oh! I got news. That independent movie got its financing sorted out and the director still wants me for the lead role!” Harry bounced on the couch, unable to contain his enthusiasm. “I’m going to Italy this summer for the shoot.”

Tom’s voice noticeably softened. “That’s awesome. You’ll do great.”

Unfortunately, Tom didn’t win the Oscar that year, but his movie did receive a bunch of them, including one for lead actor and cinematography. “Just the nomination does wonders for your career,” Tom said when Harry called him to offer his condolences on his loss. “My agent can now ask significantly more for my work.”

“Really?” Harry wondered how one went about getting an Oscar nomination for acting if it was that lucrative of an event in the long run. Apparently the answer to that question was to fuck a peach on screen.

No, really.

Harry got an Oscar nomination for doing just that. And for actor in a leading role, too. The youngest to receive it in 80 or so years.

“You were so fucking good in that movie,” Tom told him for the umpteenth time during their daily phone chat. “Not a false moment while you were on screen. It’s been a long time since I saw an actor give such an honest performance.”

“Well, I do like peaches,” Harry said with a snicker as he lay on his bed, glowing inside and out from Tom’s many compliments. “I’m just not sure what I’ll do with myself if I lose.” Harry blinked up at the ceiling. “Or what I’ll do if I actually win the fucking thing. I’m still so young and I’ve barely got any movies under my belt.”

Tom remained quiet for a few moments. “You’re already familiar with the whole circus. You know how it goes.” Tom was referring to life number 85, when Harry had been a script writer and Tom a director. They had both won Oscars that life.

“Yeah, I remember,” Harry said with a sigh. “But somehow it’s different when you’re an actor. Like they’re not just judging your work, but they’re also judging *you*.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who feels that way,” Tom replied quietly. “It is different when you work on screen instead of behind the camera.”

“It really is,” Harry sighed in agreement. “I’m starting to get recognized on the street. I never had that problem when I only wrote scripts.”

“I got recognized back then as a director from time to time but nobody really cared beyond quickly saying hello and that they loved this or that movie.” Tom fell quiet for a minute but Harry could tell he was contemplating something important to him. Harry knew Tom so well by then that he had no problems deciphering the man’s silences. “I think I figured out why we’re both so good at acting this life,” Tom finally said and then fell silent again to await Harry’s response.

“Besides winning some genetic lottery?” Harry asked while he raised his eyebrows. “You believe it’s more than some natural talent we’re both born with?”

“Think about it,” Tom said in a quiet tone which piqued Harry’s curiosity even more. “We’ve been acting for well over a hundred lives now. In every bloody life we lead, we have to act to conceal our real identities. To basically everyone around us at all times, except to each other.”

“Huh.” Harry blinked a few times in astonishment. “You might be on to something there, babe. We have been playing the grown-up version of pretend since the moment we started reincarnating.”

“Exactly.”

Harry’s lips tugged up in a cheeky smile. “So what you’re really saying is that I might actually have a chance of winning the Oscar for actor in a leading role. I’ve been acting in leading roles my whole ridiculously long existence.”

Tom chuckled in clear amusement. “Who knows. You certainly deserve to win, darling.”

Harry was unable to stop himself from gnawing on his own thumb. “Oh my god, I think I’d have an actual anxiety attack if they call out my name.”

“You’ve won Oscars before,” Tom pointed out without a hint of sympathy.

“And I almost started hyperventilating then, too,” Harry was quick to counter. The only reason he’d been able to say a bloody thing during his acceptance speech was because Tom had urged him to practice an acceptance speech in the first place, just in case he won. Harry would have created a note to bring with him but he’d been a woman that life and evening gowns rarely came with pockets to conveniently hide an acceptance speech in.

In the end Harry’s worries about actually winning were a moot point because he didn’t win the Oscar.

“I am disappointed,” Harry confessed to Tom the next day over the phone. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t. But at the same time the publicity around that movie and my nomination has definitely put my name on the map because I’ve got so many great parts lined up. And I’m going to an audition for a leading role in a new sci-fi movie. The director asked for me personally.”

“There you go,” Tom said with pride in his voice. “So the whole disappointing circus was worth it after all.”

“Yeah, it was.” Harry shook himself out of his slightly depressed mood. “How’s the shoot going?”

Tom had been cast as the leading man in a superhero movie. Well, anti-hero, to be more exact. “It’s going great. The script is so-so, but the shoot’s fine and I’m getting a generous amount of points, so there’s that.”

Points meant that an actor got a cut of the profits of the movie and they were usually the reason really talented actors ended up doing mediocre, big-budget movies.

“Fair enough,” Harry said with a grin. “You make those millions so you can buy us a nice big house once we go public with our relationship.”

“Yeah, talking about that,” Tom said, suddenly sounding utterly serious. “I’ll be in LA around the same time you’ll be there next month. We can officially get our relationship started then.”

“Right,” Harry said, sitting up at once now that they were talking about their future. “Nothing official yet, but we can get the timeline started.” They had come up with a scenario to release to the public once they were ready to take their relationship public and this would be the first step in it. Be seen in public together as friends.

“Exactly.” Tom cleared his throat once, twice. “Even if this whole thing blows up in our faces and no major studio wants to hire us ever again, we’ll always be able to keep acting. Especially with all the projects the streaming services are pumping out.”

“I know,” Harry agreed at once. “I’ve got a Netflix movie lined up this fall.” Sighing, Harry contemplated their future for a moment. “I just like being in these big projects, you know?”

“I know,” Tom said with utter conviction. “I don’t want to give this all up either if we can help it. But we won’t end up unemployed is what I’m saying.”

Over the next two years, Tom and Harry carefully created a public friendship. The internet took notice because they were such an odd couple. The older British bad boy, known for his gruff manners during interviews, his many tattoos and his ridiculously charismatic screen presence, and the younger American, humble, enthusiastic, goofy and oh so talented as an actor.

They were photographed together at premieres and parties, and candidly as they spent time together during their sparse days off shooting movies. One time a paparazzi caught Harry walking Tom’s beloved dog.

“I’m puppysitting for a friend!” Harry told the photographer with his usual amount of enthusiasm. “He’s being a very good boy, just like his owner.”

That clip went viral in no time and elevated Tom and Harry almost to cult status amongst their many fans. Not to mention the dozens of memes it sprouted that were shared on every

social media platform imaginable. Surprisingly there were very few people online who speculated that their relationship could be anything more than a friendship. Those few who did were generally ignored and called creepy or crazy or both.

Tom and Harry had agreed to come out as a couple by the time they got married. They had quietly informed their closest family members of their relationship as well as their agents. They'd met with a small army of publicists to see to it that their public announcement would be received as well as could be expected. They were booked in advance for interviews with Oprah, appearances on Ellen and a whole bunch of other TV shows.

And then two weeks before they were getting married the world shut down.

"Why is it always a fucking pandemic?" Harry moaned as he and Tom were stuck in their apartment in London. Their wedding, which would have taken place in a small castle in Scotland was obviously off the table. They had planned to buy a nice house somewhere in the English countryside after the wave of publicity was over but that was also obviously not happening anytime soon.

"Be glad it's just a corona virus and not airborne ebola or something equally terrifying," Tom mumbled before sipping his cup of coffee as he read the news on his phone.

"Yeah, okay, I'll give you that," Harry sighed while he picked up his own cup of coffee. "It's just that I have so many amazing projects lined up and now I'm stuck inside bored out of my mind."

"So write something," Tom said without looking up from his phone. "You've been complaining for two years that you haven't got time to write since your acting career really took off."

"Nobody wants to buy my scripts anyway," Harry mumbled dejectedly. The three scripts he'd handed to his agent years ago remained unsold. Harry frowned for a moment as his mind slowly stopped spinning and focussed on an idea that popped in his mind. "I could write something we could act together while we're stuck here for the foreseeable future."

That caught Tom's attention and he looked up at Harry with a quirk of his eyebrow.

Harry's thoughts lined up a story before he even knew what was happening. "Just us in a room with a table and two chairs. You as a cop, me as a murder suspect. I'll call it The Interrogation. We can put it up on YouTube or something, you know, just for fun."

"That's not a bad idea at all," Tom said with an approving nod before he turned his attention back to his phone. "Go write that."

And Harry did and he was glad that finishing the short script kept him busy and entertained for a while at least.

"Fuck," Tom said one morning during breakfast as he was scrolling through his phone again. "The cat's out of the bag."

“What?” Harry said between bites of scrambled egg. “What cat?”

“There’s a lot of rumours about us going around online right now,” Tom explained while he kept scrolling through his phone. “Apparently some anonymous source has confirmed to BuzzFeed that we were booked with Oprah to come out as a couple. All the news agencies are picking up on that, especially because people have seen us walking the dog together recently so they know we’re in lockdown together here in my flat.”

“Fuck,” Harry said while he stared at Tom in shock. There went their carefully scripted coming out story. “What sort of response are we getting?”

“Mostly positive, though there are lots of questions about how we met and whether or not I’ve groomed you,” Tom said without much emotion in his voice.

“What the fuck,” Harry said, anger igniting in his chest. “Yeah, we’re not putting up with that kind of shit.”

“What do you suggest we do?” Tom asked while he narrowed his eyes at Harry. “Have a public Zoom call with Oprah and post it on the internet?”

“Actually,” Harry said as he leaned back in his seat. “That’s not a bad idea. Well, some of it’s not a bad idea. I’m not talking to Oprah over Zoom.”

And that is how Tom and Harry ended up sitting on their couch with a small camera on a tripod aimed at themselves.

“Hi,” Harry said with a bright smile as he waved at the camera. “I’m Tim and this is my fiancé Tom.”

Tom gave a lazy salute at the camera.

“Yeah, you heard that correctly,” Harry said with a laugh. “In fact, if it wasn’t for this horrible pandemic we would have been married by now.” Schooling his features into something more serious, Harry leaned a little closer to the camera. “We hadn’t planned on coming out like this, since the world is going through a global disaster right now. People are losing their livelihoods and even their lives. A couple of privileged actors moaning about their non-problems is the last thing people need to see right now.”

“Except then rumours popped up about us,” Tom said as he tilted his head and gave the camera an almost challenging look. “Some which even suggest that our relationship isn’t exactly consensual.”

“And we’re having none of that,” Harry said as he gave the camera an equally intense look. “So this is us coming out as a couple by telling you how we met and how we got into a relationship.”

They had come up with a story about their relationship that emphasized friendship and that put Harry in the place of the instigator, to hopefully convince the majority of the public that their relationship was worth supporting.

The simple fact was that it was still unheard of for A-list actors to come out of the closet and announce they were in a same-sex relationship. There were plenty of actors who were publicly part of the LGBTQ community, but they were never given starring roles in big budget studio movies. They mostly worked in TV or smaller movies and perhaps got supporting roles in the big blockbusters. There were plenty of LGBTQ A-listers in Hollywood, but they remained firmly in the closet. For some their sexuality was a bit of an open secret that everyone politely ignored in public, but there were others that kept their relationships with the same sex so well hidden that barely anyone even suspected it of them.

What Harry and Tom were doing was unprecedented and they desperately needed the public's support if they were to keep acting in blockbusters. The problem wasn't so much the Americas and Europe where same-sex relationships were accepted by the majority of the population. The problem was that big blockbusters also had to be released in countries like Russia and China and most of the Middle-East, which all weren't keen on promoting any kind of same-sex relationships. If they refused to show a movie because the main actors were openly in a same-sex relationship it could end up costing the studio a lot of money. And studios hated losing lots of money.

But if they could get the public on their hand in most parts of the world, the studios would still make plenty of profit while hiring them and they'd be able to keep working as they had.

Once upon a time Harry might have felt uncomfortable playing the public like they were doing now, but he was old and pragmatic enough to understand the need to control their own narrative. And the public loved celebrities being honest, keeping it real and sharing a few secrets.

Hence why Tom and Harry were now giving a couple of Oscar-worthy performances in their own living room.

"We first met at a premiere way back when I was just nineteen," Harry said with a big grin. "Nothing happened then, we just talked and exchanged numbers."

"I knew back then that Timmy was going places with how talented he is. He even talked about writing and I wanted to keep an eye on him, see if he didn't come up with a good part for me at some point in the future," Tom said utterly without shame.

Harry shot his soulmate an amused smile. "At first we barely talked. We sent some texts now and then, exchanged some memes, that sort of thing."

Tom nodded in agreement. "It wasn't until we realized that we were both struggling with some mental health issues that we really started talking."

"I got diagnosed with ADHD a couple of years ago," Harry explained. He'd waited to share that about himself until their coming out. The public loved celebrities being honest about their mental health. "Because I got diagnosed so late in life I'd developed some anxiety and depression that I was still learning to deal with."

"I've been struggling with depression and addiction for years," Tom added with a sombre expression. "So that really gave us something to talk about."

“Yeah, and once we really started opening up to each other, we never stopped.” Harry got a bit of a dreamy look on his face, as if remembering some very good moments. “Before I knew it, Tom had become my best friend. And the funny thing is that we never saw each other in person during that time.”

“For two and a half years we talked almost daily and never met,” Tom said with a chuckle. “Until Timmy here couldn’t find an Airbnb and had to crash in my spare bedroom.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Harry grumbled, unable to hold back a grin while giving Tom a playful shove. “I was so sick and tired of hotels at that point. It felt like I’d been living in them for years. I had to work in LA for six weeks or so, some last minute thing, and I couldn’t find a rental space on such short notice.”

“I was in LA, too, and I did have a house for a couple of months, so I told Timmy to come stay with me.”

Harry leaned towards the camera and gave it an exaggerated wink. “So, Tumblr, now you know. They were *roommates*.” Harry was sure that remark was going to get some interesting responses. “Anyway, until we met again at your house I hadn’t even realized I’d developed feelings for you,” Harry said while glancing at Tom with an adoring smile.

“Yeah?” Tom replied with a downright sappy look on his face.

“Yeah.” Harry conjured the biggest grin he could manage on his face. “When you gave me a hug as I got out of the car, that’s when I realized something had changed.” Harry shifted in his seat as though he couldn’t contain his enthusiasm. “It was your scent, I think. I just remember hugging you and smelling you and thinking, ‘fuck me, I’m in trouble’.”

Tom threw his head back and laughed outright.

“What did you think then?” Harry poked Tom in the side with his elbow.

“When I hugged you?” Tom cleared his throat and shook his head. “I wondered in a slight panic if I was suddenly having a midlife crisis or something. I had not seen this coming.”

Harry doubled over with laughter while sagging against Tom. “Yeah, this whole thing caught us completely by surprise. Both of us. I didn’t sleep a wink that night, just kept tossing and turning as I tried to tell myself this was a very bad idea and to just leave you alone.”

“But you didn’t,” Tom said, staring down at Harry with hooded eyes.

“It took a few weeks of inner turmoil to realize that my feelings for you were genuine and that I at the very least wanted to give us a try.” Harry gave a helpless shrug while grinning at the camera. “I knew if I didn’t I’d regret it for the rest of my life. Of course, I had no clue how to go about declaring my feelings to Tom.”

“I think your distinct lack of planning helped you in the end,” Tom said with humour in his voice.

“Yeah, I just went for it. We were in the kitchen, cooking dinner after we’d both just come home from work,” Harry said, looking from Tom to the camera and back. “And as I was stirring the mushroom cream sauce while you were telling me about your day I had this very clear thought that said, ‘God, I love this man’. And since I have ADHD and I lack a fair amount of impulse control I just stepped up to Tom and kissed him mid-sentence. Just laid one on him.”

“Took me completely by surprise,” Tom admitted with a crooked grin while he briefly ducked his head.

“Yeah, instead of kissing me back he just stood there like a statue.” Harry briefly buried his face in his hands and shook his head. “Oh my god, I about died there. I pulled back and started apologizing in every way I knew how.”

“I never thought Timmy would just kiss me like that,” Tom said while staring at Harry in obvious affection. “I’d been telling myself for weeks that this wouldn’t work, that I was much too old, that I shouldn’t expect someone as amazing as him to return my feelings.”

“But you changed your mind in the end.” Harry looked straight into the camera while he spoke next. “Tom grabbed my shirt, reeled me back in and gave me a good snogging. We didn’t come up for so long that the chicken was a little dry and the pasta kinda soggy.”

“Worth it,” Tom mumbled.

“Yeah, it really was,” Harry agreed with a happy sigh. “And that was all it took, really. We both pretty much confessed quickly that this wasn’t just some fling but that there were real feelings involved. We’ve been together ever since.”

“It’s a surprise no one else figured it out until now,” Tom mused.

“Well, we did keep it to ourselves at first.” Harry sat up a little and gave the camera an even look. “Sadly, it’s still a risk to come out like this in our profession. But neither one of us wanted to live a lie once we realized our relationship was serious.”

“Yeah, keeping this a secret while we settled into the relationship wasn’t a problem,” Tom agreed while giving a few knowing nods. “But we just didn’t want to have to look over our shoulders for the rest of our lives while walking the dog together, wondering if there’s paparazzies hiding in the bushes.”

“I couldn’t live like that,” Harry said in a small voice, shoulders slumped. “I can’t keep this kind of real love to myself for very long, no matter if it costs me my career.”

“I doubt it will come to that.” Tom leaned closer and brushed a soft kiss against the corner of Harry’s mouth. “You’re far too talented. They’d be crazy not to want you in their movies.”

“Thanks,” Harry whispered and gave Tom a small smile. Then he turned back to the camera. “Just for the record, because I knew people will want to know which box we fit in. I’m pretty sure I’m bi.”

“Me, too,” Tom agreed at once. “Or maybe pan. Something like that.”

Harry frowned for a moment before staring at Tom. “I met an amazing person that I honestly, deeply and sincerely fell in love with. That’s my sexuality.”

Tom cupped the back of Harry’s head with his hand. “Well said.” And with that, Tom pressed a kiss against Harry’s lips.

“Let’s end the video here,” Harry said and he got up to shut the camera off.

Tom did some minimal editing since they wanted the footage to appear raw and real. Harry posted it to a brand new YouTube channel that he named ‘Tim and Tom’ and linked to it on his Instagram. And then they waited.

The video about broke the internet. It got over a million views in the first 24 hours alone. They trended on every social media platform and basically every media platform in the world reported on their coming out story. What Tom and Harry had done was a first. Actors of their stature never revealed something like this publicly and the fact that they did gained them a lot of support from all over the world.

People praised their honesty and their humour, talked about Tom and Harry being relationship goals and that they needed to be protected at all cost.

Understanding that they needed to keep this momentum going, Harry and Tom recorded themselves watching a few classic movies and reacting to it. They stuck with movies like The Fly and The Thing and The Goonies. Classics from the eighties that were fun to watch and that allowed them to talk about acting. People loved Harry’s enthusiasm and Tom’s gruff criticisms and those videos easily got a million views each.

People kept asking them to review more modern movies, especially ones they starred in themselves, but they refused that on account that they had to work with the people that made those movies and that wouldn’t allow them to really be critical.

They also recorded the short film Harry had written about the police interrogation in their spare bedroom during the last parts of the lockdown and posted it on their YouTube channel right when the world started opening up again. It got a lot of praise for their performances, and especially for Harry’s writing, and suddenly the scripts that had been collecting dust in his agent’s office sold within days.

They thankfully weren’t blacklisted in Hollywood but kept working on the kind of projects they wanted. Tom starred in a successful sequel to his anti-hero movie and Harry’s sci-fi movie got rave reviews.

While staying in San Francisco for some press event Harry got an idea for a movie and he wrote the script in two weeks. It had a starring role for himself and a supporting role for Tom. Since they were still so popular they had no problem finding financing for it, though they also put some of their own money into it. The budget was only 20 million, but that was still a chunk of money. Tom acted as a full producer on it while Harry managed to get a female director he’d worked with twice before to direct it.

The movie was titled 'Tenderloin' and told the story of a young man, played by Harry, who through no fault of his own ended up living on the streets of San Francisco where he developed an unlikely friendship with a fentanyl addict played by Tom. The movie portrayed a realistic and unrelenting picture of the homelessness crisis in the US. And while the story did have a hopeful ending, Tom's character died of an overdose at one point, which gave Harry plenty of chances to show off his acting skills during his character's reaction to losing his only friend.

The movie got positive reviews almost across the board and was a financial success, netting more than 100 million in profit, part of which went into Harry and Tom's bank account. It was then that they started their own production company so they could make more of such movies in the future.

Tenderloin was nominated for ten Oscars the following year and won seven, including best original screenplay, best supporting actor, best actor, best director and best movie.

Harry had rarely felt as elated as he did that evening. The cherry on the cake was that he got to kiss Tom on live television more than once. The Oscars hadn't had so many viewers in years.

"This life is going in the top five of best lives ever," Harry murmured to Tom as he held on to two Oscars while cameras flashed around them while they got ready to talk to the press.

Tom had two Oscars of his own in his hands. "The top three, easily," he said while giving Harry a quick smile before turning back to the cameras.

Yeah, all right. The top three. Harry wondered how many more Oscars they could win for future movies. He couldn't wait to find out during the rest of their life together.

Life # 54: That time Harry and Tom were theme park vloggers

Chapter Notes

Harry and Tom explore Diagon Alley in Orlando, Florida. That's it. That's the story.

Thanks so much for reading and for your support. Let me know what you think. Your comments always inspire me to write more.

Life # 54: That time Harry and Tom were theme park vloggers

Orlando, Florida, 2014

Harry was busy editing the video of their recent trip to Cedar Point in Ohio when Tom came bursting into their office.

“Josh just texted me that they’re soft opening Diagon Alley right now!” Tom said while gesturing frantically at Harry to stop working.

“Fuck!” Harry quickly hit save and then jumped out of his chair, almost bowling Tom over in his hurry to get going. “What about dinner?”

“I hadn’t started cooking yet. The meat will hold until tomorrow in the fridge,” Toms said while their corgi named Toby pranced around their feet, thinking they were going for a walk.

“You let the dogs in the yard and I’ll nuke a couple of the freezer breakfast burritos I made last week,” Harry said while collecting their camera and his backpack and a water bottle. “I need to eat something or I’ll pass out before we even get to Universal.”

“Sure. Grab my backpack as well, please. Oh, and the spare camera battery that’s still in the charger.” Tom opened the backdoor and urged their senior golden retriever mix named Angel to go do her business outside.

Harry frantically moved around the house, grabbing everything they needed. They’d been waiting for weeks now for the soft opening of Diagon Alley in Universal Studios Wizarding World of Harry Potter. It was rather a big deal, not just because of their own original identities, but also because they made a living vlogging about theme parks. And Diagon Alley was a highly anticipated addition to Universal which meant that any videos they made of it as soon as possible would get hundreds of thousands, if not millions of views easily.

The microwave dinged and Harry juggled the two piping hot burritos while he hurried to the car parked in the driveway to load everything up.

“Don’t give me that look,” Tom said to a disappointed Toby who was giving them both intense looks full of betrayal. “You’ll both be fine for a few hours.”

“We’ll go for a nice long hike tomorrow,” Harry added, giving Toby a few scratches behind his enormous ears before pulling the front door closed. Tom hopped behind the wheel while Harry slid into the passenger’s seat, only remembering to pick up the burritos at the last moment lest he sit right on top of them.

“I’m so excited!” Harry said in between bites of his burrito while Tom drove them towards interstate 4. “This is so fucking exciting.”

Tom gave him an amused look while he ate his own burrito.

“It’s not my fault I get this excited,” Harry said a bit defensively once he finished his impromptu dinner. “I was never allowed to have fun as a child this life.”

Harry had been born into a strict Mormon family. He was one of the younger kids in a family of 11, which meant he had 8 siblings. Unfortunately most of Harry’s family had firmly rejected and even disowned him when Harry met Tom, got his memories of his previous lives back, and decided to turn his back on the church to go live in sin with his brand new boyfriend. It was unfortunate that things turned out like that, but at least Tom’s family, who were originally from Orlando, were much more accepting of their son’s sexuality and choice in partners. Harry kept in touch with three of his siblings, who’d also turned their backs on the church. He hadn’t spoken to his parents in years, though.

“We’ve more than made up for that by now,” Tom said while he tapped his thumbs against the steering wheel. “We go to theme parks for a living, for fuck’s sake.”

Harry grinned at him. “Yeah, I know. This is definitely one of the most amazing jobs we’ve ever had.”

They hadn’t planned on becoming theme park vloggers. Harry had met Tom while Tom attended the University of Utah in Salt Lake City where Harry worked a part-time job in a McDonalds near the campus. Tom had just started on a degree in architecture but after getting his memories back he realized he didn’t want to go over 100k into debt for a degree he might not even end up using. Instead he had dropped out of university while he and Harry set up a little web development business, which earned them a nice enough living for a while.

They moved to Orlando to be near Tom’s family and naturally they’d gotten annual passes to all the theme parks in the area. What had started as a simple YouTube channel about the fun they had while visiting Disney and Universal had grown into a popular channel that paid their bills well enough while they travelled around the world, documenting their visits to every theme park imaginable. They had become quite the roller coaster connoisseurs in the process.

“It certainly beats sitting on our asses all day building websites,” Tom said with a chuckle. He glanced at Harry with a raised eyebrow when Harry got out a tube of sunscreen from his backpack and proceeded to apply it on his face and arms. “What are you bothering with sunscreen for? It’s almost six in the evening.”

Harry gave Tom a disbelieving look. “We live in the skin cancer capitol of the world.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s Australia,” Tom muttered while he stared at the traffic in front of them.

“Oh.” Harry frowned. “So what’s Florida the capitol of then? I know it’s the capitol of something.”

“Lightning, I think,” Tom said with a shrug.

“I hate lightning.” Harry leaned forward and peered out of the car window. “We might actually get some thunderstorms soon judging by that sky.”

“It would be a bigger surprise if we didn’t get them in July in Florida, to be honest.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said quietly. He loved living in Orlando because of their proximity to Disney World and Universal Studios, but he doubted he’d ever get used to the heat and the frequent thunderstorms. Tom, who had grown up there, was used to it a lot more.

It took them a good half hour to get to Universal and by the time Tom parked their car in the parking garage Harry was about ready to burst out of his skin with enthusiasm. Even the drizzle of rain that greeted them inside the park couldn’t spoil his good mood. Harry pulled his raincoat out of his backpack with practised ease and quickly slipped it on as they hurried towards the newly constructed Diagon Alley.

“Hopefully they’ll still let us in,” Tom managed to say as he pulled his own raincoat on while all but running through the park.

“What?” Harry gaped at Tom while he almost bowled over a couple of German tourists.

“Don’t say that! You’ll jinx us!”

Thankfully they got there in time and were still allowed to slip inside the dark tunnel that opened up in the Muggle version of the wizarding shopping street.

“Oh wow,” Harry said, mouth falling open as they both stood still to take in the sight before them. “It looks nothing like Diagon Alley, and yet I still love it.”

“I’ve got the camera rolling,” Tom muttered by way of warning to keep talk of their previous lives to a minimum.

Harry gave a dismissive wave. “I’ll edit it out later.” He gave the camera a big smile. “We’re here! Finally we get to see what Diagon Alley looks like and it doesn’t disappoint so far. It looks amazing.” While Harry walked ahead Tom trailed after him while carefully manoeuvring the camera to get the best shots of their surroundings.

Several visitors were waving their wands at shop windows and other landmarks, making all sorts of things move and lights flash.

“Oh no!” Harry gave Tom a wide-eyed look. “We forgot to bring our wands!”

Tom looked very much like he wanted to roll his eyes.

Harry glanced around frantically and then heaved a sigh of relief. “They’ve got an Ollivander’s! I’m buying a new wand.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Tom called after Harry. “We’ve already got plenty of those useless things.”

Harry ignored his soulmate and fifteen minutes later he stepped out of a cramped Muggle version of the famous wand shop holding another wand to add to his collection at home. “I got Hermione’s wand,” Harry said with a happy little smile while he showed it off to Tom. “Her wand has always worked well for me.”

This time Tom didn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes. “It’s a piece of plastic.”

“It’s a business expense,” Harry said just a bit snootily. “I got the receipt so we can write it off our taxes.”

That seemed to appease Tom a bit and he got the camera rolling again while Harry happily tried out the various points where you could wave your wand around. He made a toilet flush and eyes blink and a mermaid statue spritz water at unsuspecting visitors.

“This is a surprising amount of fun,” Harry said, showing off Hermione’s wand by aiming it at the camera. Just then the huge dragon that was perched right on top of the Escape from Gringotts building started roaring. Tom immediately moved the camera towards it and filmed it releasing a huge burst of fire.

“Awesome!” Harry crowed while the crowd around them went wild. “Too bad the Escape from Gringotts ride isn’t open yet. I can’t wait to ride it.”

“Yeah, that should be an interesting experience,” Tom agreed while he zoomed out a little to show off the building.

“I heard Voldemort has a starring role in it,” Harry couldn’t help point out with a cheeky grin.

Tom carefully didn’t rise to Harry’s bait. “Like I said, it will be an interesting ride.”

They went to Knockturn Alley next.

“Why is it so fucking dark in here?” Harry muttered, barely able to see anything.

“Because the muggles don’t realize Knockturn Alley is simply the slums of the wizarding world,” Tom whispered as they tried to make out their surroundings. “A place where the poor and undesirables are forced to live because they can’t afford to live anywhere else.”

“Yeah, but they still need to be able to see.” Harry almost walked into the person in front of him. To his left a collection of shrunken heads in a shop window began to sing. “What the fuck? What is the obsession with shrunken human heads? We don’t actually have them in the wizarding world.”

Chuckling, Tom aimed his camera at the display. “That production designer who added them to the third movie certain deserves a raise for how much their idea is still being milked years later.”

Harry shook his head in disappointment and turned away only to be met by the wanted poster for Sirius Black. A strange wave of melancholia swept through him. If only his beloved godfather knew how many muggles ended up adoring him. Well, a fictional version of him at any rate. Harry sighed. "Let's just go back to the light."

Tom quickly got a few more shots for their video and then they left that dark hole in a hurry.

On the small stage in the main part of the alley a few performers were putting up a show about the Tale of the Three Brothers using some amazing puppetry. Harry watched it, completely mesmerized.

"That's very well done," Tom murmured as he recorded the show.

Harry nodded in agreement. "Yeah, that looks great." It was strange, though, to see the story about the Deathly Hallows being performed in the open like that. Officially, Tom and Harry didn't know for certain that their strange fates were caused by the Hallows. Unofficially, they were pretty much certain Harry being the Master of Death caused their endless reincarnation to happen because what else could it be?

Next on the stage was an amazing singer who was supposed to be Celestina Warbeck.

"She's much better than the real Celestina Warbeck could ever even hope to be," Tom said with a relieved look on his face.

"Yeah, this music is actually great," Harry agreed, also feeling more than a little relieved. He well remembered the real Warbeck's warbling. Molly had certainly loved that singer a lot and Harry had to suffer through her songs whenever there was a gathering at the Burrow in his first life. He still hadn't fully recovered from that, even over 50 lifetimes later, he was sure.

"Let's see if we can find something to eat," Tom said after the singer ended her performance. Harry gave her a huge round of applause while Tom looked around to find a restaurant.

"I saw the Leaky Cauldron earlier." Harry led the way to the muggle version of the wizarding pub.

"It's a lot cleaner than the real thing, I'll give them that," Harry said as they stepped into the restaurant. It looked nothing like the real thing, not that Harry had expected it would.

"It's also a lot more expensive." Tom gave the menu a critical onceover while they stood in line. "Let's just order something quick now and we'll come back another time for a dedicated restaurant review video."

"Works for me," Harry easily agreed. They loved doing restaurant review videos of all the places you could eat in Orlando's theme parks. Those videos were usually quite popular, too, and were easy earners for them.

They both got the fish and chips. "They really dare to charge 17 bucks for this?" Tom said while he stared down at his plastic plate in quiet outrage. "Three small pieces of fried cod and seven fried potato wedges."

Harry bit into a piece of fish. "It's pretty good, actually," he said after swallowing his mouthful. "But yeah, it is absurdly expensive, but that's what you get in a theme park."

Tom tried his own fish and had to concur that at least it tasted fine even if they were being charged a king's ransom for the meal.

For dessert they went to Fortescue's Ice cream shop where they got butterbeer flavoured ice cream.

Harry moaned while he ate a spoonful. "This is so fucking good, holy crap."

Curiously, Tom tried his own ice cream and then gave Harry a surprised but pleased look. "Someone should market this in the real Diagon Alley. They'd make a fortune."

"Next time we're wizards in the UK," Harry said with a wink and a chuckle and then eagerly finished his dessert.

Since the crowds weren't as packed anymore as before, Tom and Harry were able to visit some of the shops.

"Aww," Harry said when he noticed a whole array of snowy owls inside the Magical Menagerie. He would always miss his first feathery friend, no matter it had been thousands of years since he'd had her by his side.

"You already have three Hedwigs at home," Tom said, though his smile was soft and understanding. Then he glanced around the shop and frowned. "Why is there never a plush toy of Nagini?"

Harry snorted, melancholic mood gone at once. "Because she was a murderous bitch that ate people?"

"Hm." Tom didn't look at all impressed while he narrowed his eyes at Harry. "Perhaps."

They got some footage for their video, with Harry gushing over all the adorable plushies, and then they moved onto Madam Malkin's where they admired the many wizarding robes. "These Hogwarts uniforms look a lot better than the real thing," Harry mused as he held up a Gryffindor set.

"I hate to say it but I agree with you." Tom briefly turned off the camera. "Then again, these are designed by professional designers. The actual Hogwarts uniforms were put together hundreds of years ago by a bunch of backwater witches and wizards who were many things, but a professional seamstress was not one of them."

Harry couldn't hold back a bout of laughter at Tom's assessment of Hogwarts' founders.

Finally they ended up back in Knockturn Alley. "There's a shop here, too," Harry said in quiet amazement. "I hadn't even noticed at first, what with the crowds and the darkness."

Borgin and Burkes was Death Eater themed, to say the least. It sold Death Eater masks and costumes and T-shirts with all sorts of Death Eater slogans on them.

Leaning closer to Tom, Harry whispered, "Can you imagine the look on Lucius or Bellatrix's face should they ever find out that the Death Eaters ended up as overpriced Muggle merchandise in a theme park?"

"It's a genuine shame that we'll probably never find out what their reaction would be," Tom agreed and then turned the camera on for some final footage.

They left the park right around closing time, both exhausted from all the new things they'd seen. Harry leaned back in the passenger seat of the car while Tom drove them out of the parking garage.

"That was great," Harry mumbled, eyes half closed. "I mean, it looked nothing like the real thing, but it was still great."

"Yeah, the design and execution was top notch," Tom said while taking a left turn. "I've got several ideas for future videos to record there already."

"Good." Harry briefly closed his eyes, quietly processing all the new information while Tom drove them home. "I do miss magic."

"Hm?" Tom quickly glanced at Harry before focusing his attention back onto the road.

"I mean, I don't mind being Muggles," Harry explained while he blinked his eyes open again. "But whenever we don't have magic I do miss it."

Tom's brows furrowed down as he obviously gave that some thought. "I don't. Not really."

That made Harry sit up and stare at Tom in astonishment. "Really? Lord fucking Voldemort doesn't miss magic when he's forced to live as a muggle for the majority of his lives?"

"I did at first," Tom said with an amused little smile aimed straight at Harry. "The first couple of lives when we were muggles I was definitely pissed off that I didn't have any magic. But not anymore."

"Why?" Harry couldn't keep the incredulity out of his voice. "How can you not miss it?"

"Because it doesn't change anything in the end," Tom said, his gaze steady and his voice calm while he gave Harry a look full of sympathy. "Are you happier when you're a magical person than when you're a muggle?"

That question actually brought Harry up short. "Huh."

"Because I'm not," Tom said, focusing his eyes on the road again. "While magic is fun and amazing, it doesn't make me happier than when I'm living as a muggle. It's kind of like having a lot of money. It's fun and convenient to be wealthy but in the end it doesn't make me happier."

"I suppose," Harry said slowly while his mind was spinning in circles under the weight of this sudden revelation. "I'm very happy this life, like the life before..." Harry stopped talking at once.

“Bad example,” Tom said with a knowing look.

“Yeah,” Harry sighed. Their previous life had been a shitshow that ended prematurely. Harry had been a thirteen year old girl in Syria who’d ended up married against her will to a thirty year old man who eagerly used his new wife in whatever way he pleased no matter her objections. Tom was Harry’s neighbour in Harry’s new home, also a young girl married against her will to an older man. They’d seen no way out of their situation at first, but after her dearest husband had raped her for the umpteenth time, Harry had enough. She’d slit her husband’s throat after he’d gone to sleep and then she’d snuck into Tom’s house and stabbed Tom’s husband to death as well. Tom, fifteen and 8 months pregnant at the time, had thankfully enough sense left to make Harry change her blood splattered clothes while she stole her late husband’s car. They made a mad dash for the border in a desperate bid to escape. Since Tom was pregnant she didn’t want to simply kill herself like they might have done otherwise to start a new life.

Unfortunately several extended family members found the bodies of the murdered men and chased Tom and Harry down in a small army of cars, eventually driving them off the road at breakneck speed, which ended up killing them both.

“The life before that was great though,” Tom pointed out, obviously trying to pull Harry out of the horrible memories he’d fallen into.

“Yeah, it was,” Harry agreed with a tentative smile. They’d lived in South-Africa. Harry had been a game warden in Kruger Park while Tom had worked for an aid organization that provided free healthcare for the poor. They’d had not a speck of magic and they weren’t wealthy by any means, but they had enjoyed living that life immensely. Then Harry remembered something and he frowned. “I did get struck by lightning that one time while I was out tracking a rhino.”

“But you survived,” Tom said with a dismissive little wave. “You were fine.”

“It was still traumatizing,” Harry muttered.

“Do you even remember it?”

“Well, no. One moment I was standing beside my jeep, looking through my binoculars and the next thing I know I woke up in the hospital, but still... the idea was certainly traumatizing.” Harry crossed his arms and gave Tom a mock glare. “But I get your point of what you were trying to say. Having magic, or wealth, is a bonus, but they’re not necessary for happiness.”

“Exactly,” Tom said softly while giving Harry a fond look. “Look at our current lives. We don’t have magic and we’re not particularly wealthy, but I’m very happy living this life with you.”

“Me, too,” Harry said while he contemplated Tom’s conclusion. They made a nice living vlogging about theme parks but they were by no means rich. They had no debt, besides a modest mortgage, and while they travelled a lot for work they otherwise were pretty frugal in their day to day lives, like they usually were unless they had millions in the bank. “It’s like

there's this goldilocks zone of comfortable living. Make sure you're debt-free, live within your means, have some savings, prepare for retirement, and if you can manage all that you can live a happy life quite easily."

"That's a good way of putting it," Tom agreed after a moment of thought. "Ultimately life is what you make of it with the means you've been given for it."

"And having a soulmate there with you every step of the way also helps," Harry said with a grin.

Tom gave Harry a brief look that was full of adoration. "That is certainly true."

They remained quiet for a few minutes until Harry said, "But you can't deny that seeing a fictional version of your own life is fucking awesome, even if they got the taste of butterbeer completely wrong."

Tom rolled his eyes and released an exasperated sigh. "It tastes better than the swill they serve in the real wizarding world."

"It does not!" Harry sat up in outrage at once. "I can't believe you said that."

"And I can't believe you yet again spent actual money on a piece of plastic that you dare call a wand, but here we are," Tom said, his expression full of challenge.

"Ugh, I can't believe I'm stuck living every fucking life with you," Harry muttered, staring out the side window with a vengeance. "You know what you should do? Apply for a job with the fun police. You'd be very good at it, telling others what they can or cannot do for fun with their own money." Harry grabbed the plastic wand and aimed it at Tom's head while he scrunched up his own face in concentration.

"What are you doing?" Tom asked, unable to hold back a grin.

"Trying to turn you into a pigeon but luckily for you it's not working." Harry lowered the wand with a small huff of frustration. "Mark my words, Tom, the next time we have magic I'm transfiguring you."

"I love you so fucking much," Tom said with a ridiculously sappy smile while he turned into their street.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry sighed while glancing at his stupid soulmate. "Love you, too, you ridiculous muggle."

Life #101: That time Harry and Tom lived during the last ice age

Chapter Notes

This time we're going very far back into the past and we'll see how well Tom and Harry handle themselves in a time when even the wheel hadn't been invented yet.

You know, I've often wondered if being autistic serves a purpose. And then I end up writing a series of stories about Harry and Tom living many different lives and suddenly it all comes together. So yeah, blame this fic on my ability to fixate on the strangest things during my life, which includes ancient history. I'm no historian, but I do have autistic superpowers, let's keep it with that.

Thanks for reading. I hope you'll enjoy it. Let me know what you think! Your comments make all this worthwhile.

Life #101: That time Harry and Tom lived during the last ice age

Ancient Europe, around 12000 BCE

Harry and Tom met during the summer mammoth hunt.

The fact that they now lived during a time when woolly mammoths still existed took them a moment to process once they got their memories back.

Tom's tribe joined up with Harry's tribe on the vast tundra somewhere in the east of ancient Europe. There were rituals to follow when two tribes met up, to ensure that everyone had good intentions and wanted to work for the common good of all people involved.

The elders of both tribes met around a campfire fuelled by dried mammoth manure while they ate freshly cooked trout baked on a flat stone that stood balanced over the flames. They exchanged elaborate greetings, and necklaces made with prized seashells and clay beads tied together on thin strips of leather, as tokens of good will. As everyone else busied themselves setting up their tents made of mammoth ribs and tusks, covered by mammoth skins, the elders talked about the conditions of the weather, the land and the available game.

The elders of Tom's tribe brought news that the mammoths had not arrived in their usual summer grazing grounds and that's why their tribe had looked further afield for an opportunity to hunt the enormous beasts. They all needed to catch at least a few mammoths to be able to survive the harsh winters.

Harry was sixteen springs old and this would be his first mammoth hunt where he was allowed to accompany the hunters. Their people did not count birthdays, as a modern calendar had not yet been invented, but they did count seasons. And every time someone

survived a winter they were another spring old. Tom had just seen his eighteenth spring and was now considered a man grown, able to hunt all manner of big game.

And such big game there was out there!

Woolly rhinos and aurochs and Irish elk and tarpan and steppe bison. Even the enormous cave bears were occasionally hunted for their meat and fur, though they didn't taste very good. Their meat was very tough, stringy and gamey, but when there was nothing else to eat Harry was happy enough to use it to fill his hungry stomach. Their fur was fantastic as sleeping mats, to sleep on or under. It would keep you warm on even the coldest nights.

"My kingdom for a camera," Harry whispered in English once their camps were set up and he and Tom had a moment to talk in private away from everyone else. "Mammoths, Tom! Can you believe any of this?"

Tom gave Harry a very fond smile. "It was only a matter of time that we reincarnated this far into the past." Tom's skin and hair were dark, but he had the most amazing sky blue eyes. Harry's skin was dark, too, as were his eyes, but his hair was a chestnut brown that lightened in the summer.

"I suppose," Harry said, still barely able to believe that they were now living in the actual fucking *ice age*. They had lived primitive lives in ancient times before. Once they were part of a tribe that lived deep in the Amazon rainforest, and once they were part of the Cherokee tribe in North America, both times before the Americas were discovered by Europeans. They'd also lived in ancient Egypt and ancient Rome and ancient China. So they were familiar with primitive lives by now, but living during the actual ice age was still a rather unique experience. "How far back in time do you think we're living?"

"That's hard to say," Tom mumbled with a small frown. "Mammoths and woolly rhinos seem to be getting scarcer, so quite late in the ice age, I think. Probably no earlier than 15000 BCE."

Harry snorted and gave Tom an incredulous look. "We're eating them to extinction, is what you mean." Harry gestured at the camp a small distance away. "Every human alive today hunts and kills what they can, with no regard for conservation."

"It's the only way to survive," Tom said with a patient smile, though he looked a bit sad as well as he continued talking. "Humans need to consume a lot of meat to survive these harsh conditions. But I do believe climate change, the end of the ice age, also plays a significant part in the extinction of most of the megafauna still alive today."

"Yeah," Harry sighed, as he stared off into the distance. The tundra was vast and almost completely flat where they were camped. The skies were a deep blue, with not a cloud to be seen. Harry knew that losing all the megafauna was inevitable, but it was still a rather depressing thought that all the amazing animals still around during their time would soon all be gone forever.

"Just think," Tom said, giving Harry a nudge with his shoulder. He was dressed in clothes made completely from animal skins, as was Harry. Their boots and pants were made from

caribou skin, their undershirts from soft deer leather and their coats from woolly rhino skins, which were incredibly warm. So warm in fact that Harry shrugged his off, leaving him in his sleeveless leather shirt. "This is the cleanest air we've ever breathed in, during any life." And as if to demonstrate, Tom inhaled a deep breath, held it in until he couldn't any longer and then blew it out in a big puff.

"There's no pollution," Harry said with a bright smile, understanding what Tom was getting at. The whole world was still absolutely pristine. There was no industry of any kind, no matter how primitive. Heck, agriculture had barely been invented yet in the cradle of civilisation, back in the middle east. There was nothing around that could pollute the air or water or land. "Let's go take a dip. There's a small river nearby."

They took long, sharpened sticks with them, for defence in case they came across some predators. There were all sort of beasts out there that wouldn't mind dining on a nice, juicy human. Cave lions and cave hyenas and cave wolves. And all were significantly bigger than their counterparts that were still alive in modern times. Lots of things hung around caves, apparently, but Harry's tribe and many other tribes didn't spend much time there. Bats lived in caves and carried both bat bugs, the ancestor of the bed bug, and rabies. Neither were things humans had much of a defence against in those days so they preferred to avoid it altogether unless they could find no other shelter in truly bad weather.

The small river was only a ten minute walk away. It meandered through the tundra and wasn't very deep for the most part. But there were a few bends in it, with steep banks, that offered water too deep to stand in. Harry quickly shoved his clothes off and jumped into the deep part with a loud splash. The second he came back up he cried out in shock. "Holy fuck, that's cold!"

Tom laughed at him while he got naked as well and he didn't let Harry's proclamation keep him from jumping in as well. "Cold or not," Tom said with chattering teeth as he held onto the bank beside Harry. "It's amazing to get clean again. We've been walking for weeks now without many chances to bathe."

The people during the ice age weren't necessarily unhygienic and quite liked being clean. There just weren't always many chances to bathe, especially during winter when everything was frozen and whatever water was available was freezing cold and would sooner kill you than get you clean.

"I'm so looking forwards to this life," Harry said with a bright grin, eyes alight with joy. "We're actually living in the fucking ice age, how cool is that?"

"It's bound to be more interesting than our last life," Tom quietly agreed with an amused smile while giving Harry a look full of warmth. Their previous life they'd been born in the Philippines, where they'd started a successful investment business. They'd taken an early retirement and then spent a decade sailing around the world in a luxurious catamaran. So the fact that Tom thought this life would be more interesting than that was saying something.

Harry splashed around a bit in the gently streaming water, ducking his head under a few times to wash his hair. In Harry's tribe they regularly cut their hair with stone knives to keep

it manageable and easily untangled. Tom's hair was longer, though, and divided by a few thick braids that were all tied together in the back.

"Your eyes are amazing," Harry whispered as he moved closer to Tom to float beside him so he could stare in his light blue eyes. Then he laughed when Tom's face lit up. "How big is your anthropological boner right now?"

Tom had been an anthropologist once, quite a few lives in the past. "It's quite substantial," Tom said without a hint of shame. "I do believe humans here around this time are right in the middle of transitioning to a more Caucasian appearance. It's endlessly fascinating to see all the natural variations in the people around us."

Harry nodded in understanding. It was interesting to realize that these changes in mankind had happened in small increments within different tribes. In Harry's tribe there were two children with somewhat lighter skin born from parents with dark skin like almost everyone else. Harry and some of his direct family members had straight, brown hair instead of the deep black of others. And in Tom's tribe there were apparently a few people with blue eyes, Tom included, while most others had brown eyes.

A warm flush of lust stirred in Harry's belly as he stared at his soulmate. Hey, he was a teenager who'd just found the love of his many lives, so you could hardly blame him for that. He pushed himself a bit closer and quickly brushed a kiss across Tom's lips.

Tom got the idea at once and wrapped his arm around Harry's waist while he pulled them to a slightly shallower part of the small river, so they could stand up instead of treading water. Once they found their footing, Harry attacked Tom's mouth and soon they were locked together in a hungry kiss. Their hands disappeared beneath the water and closed around their hardening cocks and before long they were thrusting into each other's fists as they moaned in shared pleasure.

They climaxed very close together and gave each other a couple of lazy kisses while they smiled at each other.

Above them on the steep, grassy bank they heard giggling.

Harry looked up and saw his youngest brother and a few of their cousins and friends hanging over the ridge, spying on them. In the distance he saw his grandmother, Sila, standing there, leaning lightly on a wooden spear while she stared at them with raised eyebrows. "Are you making friends, Mala?" his grandmother called with a knowing little smile.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. Apparently, family never changed, even if you lived fifteen thousand years in the past.

"I'm Mala," Harry said in their native tongue while he studiously ignored his kin, including all the giggling children.

"I'm Kotar," Tom replied, looking thoroughly amused.

“Now they introduce themselves,” Harry’s little brother Mok said and then collapsed into giggles again. It was quite common for future partners to find each other while tribes met up. That was the most important way to avoid inbreeding. Harry and Tom were both male, so inbreeding wasn’t a concern for them. But same-sex couples still fulfilled an important position in their tribal society.

“So Borta might have found a successor after all,” Harry’s grandmother mused while Harry and Tom crawled out of the river and put their fur clothing on again.

Borta was the Wise of Harry’s tribe. The Wise were a kind of shaman and healer and councillor all wrapped into one. The Wise were always made up of same-sex couples, either men or women. Borta’s partner had died a number of years back from a chest infection during a particularly harsh winter, and Borta was getting on in years as well.

“Yeah, you can tell the elders that Kotar and myself will be the next Wise of the tribe,” Harry said with a cheeky grin as he met up with his grandmother. “I like him, so I’m keeping him.”

Tom tied the strings of his heavy fur coat together. “Do I not get a say in this?”

“Too late,” Harry’s grandmother said with a laugh. “Mala’s claimed you now. You will stay.”

“You kissed,” Mok all but shouted. “You now have to stay with Mala.”

“Well, I guess I’m well and truly caught.” Tom grinned at Harry, and Harry quickly snatched up his hand and held it all the way back to camp. The adults all seemed happy enough to let Harry and Tom indulge in their teenage relationship for the next few days as they got ready to hunt the approaching mammoths.

For the actual hunt the tribes split up again, after discussing tactics extensively. They would drive the beasts to a nearby cliff. The cliff wasn’t all that high, no more than twenty feet, but if a heavy animal like a mammoth fell off it, they’d die instantly.

The scouts returned with news of the approaching herd of mammoths and Harry joined his father and his uncles and other adults from his tribe as they lay in wait to scare the herd into a stampede. This wasn’t without risk, as mammoths were incredibly strong yet quite quick when they wanted to be. A human could not outrun a mammoth. All they had to defend themselves from the enormous beasts were spears with sharpened stone tips. That wasn’t always enough, though, and from time to time one of their number would die as they were trampled by a herd of angry mammoths.

It was worth the risk, though. Without a mammoth kill, they wouldn’t all survive the winter.

Seeing the woolly mammoth approach, a small herd of some ten animals, gave Harry butterflies in his stomach. How amazing was it that someone who spent most of his lives living in modern times now got to see these extinct animals with his own eyes? There was very little time to admire them, though, as they were soon up on their feet to start driving the beasts towards the cliffs. Mammoths weren’t stupid, though, and the matriarch of the herd realized that following the path the humans laid out for them was a bad idea. She pushed her way through their line and most of the herd followed her. But three animals got split off. Two

females and a younger male, all with dark red fur that danced through the air as the beasts stampeded towards the cliffs.

Harry and his kin chased them, spears held high. Tom's tribe met up with them from the other side, making sure the beasts couldn't go around the cliff.

It was soon all over as the three animals fell to their deaths with terrified cries.

While everyone else hurried towards the carcasses at the bottom of the cliff, Harry remained standing at the top, staring down at the dead animals while an uncomfortable stone settled in the pit of his stomach.

"We'll eat well this winter," Tom whispered as he stepped up beside Harry. "Come, let's join our kin in breaking down the beasts."

"Yeah," Harry sighed and then followed Tom down the hill.

Three mammoths meant plenty of meat and bones for both tribes to use. The skins were divided as well, as were the tusks. That night, and every night for almost a week, they all slept outside as their tents were used to preserve the thinly sliced strips of mammoth meat.

Poles were placed horizontally inside the tents, as many as would fit. They hung the strips of meat around them and then started a fire with wood they'd carefully transported across many miles, as there were very few trees on the tundra. A large stone was used to cap the fire, so lots of smoke would dry and preserve the meat. This way they could store it all the way through winter. Everyone in the tribe helped with the work, young and old, because they only had a small window of time to get all the meat preserved before it spoiled in the summer sun.

Once the work was done, a week later, their tribes celebrated together with a large fire at the centre of their camp. People clapped their hands and sang songs and danced around the fire. Some even played small flutes carved from bones.

Tom wrinkled his nose as he heard that particular music. "That sounds worse than bagpipes."

"We're witnessing the birth of human culture in front of us," Harry whispered back, unable to hold back a grin. "And you're complaining about the sound? Some anthropologist you are."

Tom stuck his nose in the air and sniffed, but then he quickly smiled as someone handed him a few pieces of cracked open mammoth bones, the marrow cooked perfectly inside of it. Tom scooped some of it up with his fingers and ate it eagerly. As he offered the bone to Harry he said, "Could do with some salt but it's filling and nutritious."

Harry also ate some of the marrow. It was one of the smoother meals they had available to them. "At least it's something we don't have to chew for hours on end."

"Have you noticed how much more pronounced everyone's jaws are?" Tom whispered, apparently eager enough to slip into anthropologist mode once the subject was food instead of music.

“Yeah, because almost everything requires really vigorous chewing. I’ve never had such strong jaw muscles in any of our lives before.” Harry frowned as he leaned a bit closer to Tom. “I swear, sometimes what comes out of my arse looks more like horse manure than the regular shit I’m used to.”

“That’s all the fibre, darling,” Tom said while looking thoroughly amused. “I doubt colon cancer is a problem for mankind in this day and age.”

Harry’s inner dentist had something to say about the situation as well. “Yeah, and while our teeth are quite healthy because we rarely eat any sugar, they still wear down quite quickly because of all that roughage in our diets.”

Dental issues like tooth loss and infections were a common cause of death, as had been the case for mankind during every age before modern dentistry was invented.

Borta the Wise sat down beside Harry on the ground and gave him and Tom a considering look. “You two have grown close, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” Harry said while giving Borta a reassuring smile. “We’ll be happy to learn from you to become the next Wise, right, Kotar?”

Tom nodded in agreement. “I have decided to stay with your tribe, be with Mala.”

Borta’s entire face lit up in joy. “I am so very pleased to hear that. As soon as we travel, I shall begin to teach you.”

Tom’s tribe had two fairly young Wise, a couple of women no older than thirty. So it made sense for Tom to join Harry’s tribe, even though Tom’s family obviously mourned his decision. There was no knowing when their tribes might meet up again, since they were nomadic and they followed the game where it went. They might meet up next summer again, or they might not see each other for a decade. And a lot could change in a decade.

Tom embraced his parents and grandfather and his siblings for a long time when their tribes went their separate ways again. One of Harry’s female cousins had decided to stay with Tom’s tribe since she’d developed feelings for one of Tom’s cousins. She, too, got an elaborate goodbye.

They got moving again, always searching for more food. They gathered lots of seeds from all types of plants, though a majority were grasses. These were the plants that would one day be domesticated and become wheat and barley and oats. Their seeds now were small and tough but nutritious. They were ground on a flat stone and then water was added to make something called gruel. This was left to thicken and then baked on a large stone that balanced over the fire to make a very primitive sort of coarse flatbread. It was bland, because it lacked salt, and it took a lot of chewing, but the flavour wasn’t half bad.

Sometimes they dug up roots and tubers that they mixed in with the gruel, which gave the bread a different texture, though it made it no less chewy.

Since Tom and Harry were to become the new Wise, they were given the opportunity to start constructing a tent of their own. They were given the pick of the ribs and tusks that had been collected from the recent mammoth kill and they were given the hides to work and tan. The tanning was done with nothing but tree bark, which was rich in tannins. They spent weeks scraping the hides, removing any flesh and fat, with Harry's whole family helping out to get the job done. Then they reached a forest at the foot of a small mountain range. They used their stone axes to strip as much bark from oak trees as they could. They soaked both bark and hides in a nearby lake and rolled both up together to let the tannins do their job in turning the hide into leather.

The hides dried and cured as stiff as a board, so afterwards they had to resoak all of them and then work and scrape and twist them endlessly to make sure they became soft and pliable to use to cover their new tent.

But, after a few months, just in time for fall, Harry and Tom had their own, small tent. They tied the whole thing together on top of long poles that they pulled along as they moved across the wild.

"I can't believe how much effort that took," Harry whispered to Tom the first night they slept together in their new tent. "I don't think we ever realized how spoiled we were whenever we could pop over to the department store and buy a tent for fifty quid."

"Agriculture changes everything," Tom whispered back as he turned on his side to look at Harry in the darkness. "Before agriculture people spent all of their time just securing the most basic necessities for survival."

"Food, water, shelter," Harry summed up. "That's all we have time for now."

Tom made a soft noise of agreement. "Yeah. Once people learn to grow food and domesticate livestock they'll finally have time to use their minds to invent things that will make all of our lives easier."

"The wheel," Harry said with a chuckle.

Tom remained quiet for so long that Harry thought he'd fallen asleep, but then he said, "I think I'm going to come up with a few inventions that will help the people in this time."

"Tom," Harry said with a hint of a warning in his voice. "You cannot go and invent the printing press or the steam engine or something like that."

"Nothing advanced like that. Just wait and see," Tom said in a reassuring tone which did nothing to put Harry's mind at ease. He knew his soulmate was far too ambitious for his own good. But surprisingly, Tom didn't immediately go out to change the world. For a while, nothing out of the ordinary happened as they kept moving around the wilds of the ancient world.

Along the way they hunted what they could, keeping the smoked mammoth meat for the upcoming winter. They encountered more than one herd of aurochs, but they left them alone. No one in their right mind hunted aurochs with nothing but stone-tipped spears unless they

were truly desperate for food. Aurochs were the ancestors of modern cattle. They stood seven feet at the shoulder, had long, sharp, forward pointing horns and they were perpetually pissed off. Aurochs regularly fought off cave lions, the biggest cats that had ever lived, so a few humans on foot with a pointy stick stood little chance.

While they camped near the lake they did hunt some Irish elk. They were neither Irish nor a real elk, but they were the largest species of deer that had ever lived. They were closely related to the red deer that were still around in modern times and they had the biggest antlers of any deer species, twice as large as those of the average moose.

They were very hard to catch in a chase, but you could trap them. Harry's whole tribe helped to dig a large hole near the lake where lots of wildlife came to drink. They used stone axes and large pieces of antler for it and after a few days they had a hole big enough to trap an Irish Elk in. They covered it up with branches and leaves and then they waited.

It took almost a week, but then they caught two. A female with her six month old fawn had both fallen in. Their alarmed cries drew the attention of a bunch of cave hyenas. They looked like their African spotted cousins, except that they were bigger. Honestly, everything was apparently bigger in the ice age. The hunters were able to drive them away from the pit with their spears, but that night they heard them move around the trees around their camp. They kept many fires lit to ward off the beasts. The deer meat was smoked the next day and would keep their tribe fed for weeks and weeks. The bones were used for tools and art. Carving bones with their stone knives was a fun way to spend what little free time they had during the evening.

While life was hard and people were kept busy from dawn until dusk, there was also time for more pleasant things. They bathed in streams and lakes, and Harry and Tom enjoyed spending time together during those sparse moments. They sang songs in the evening while they sewed hides together for clothing in the firelight. The adults loved sharing stories about previous hunts and about the animals and land around them.

The children had plenty of games to play in between the work they did around the camp. They made beads from clay they found in the river bank and let them dry in the sun before using them in similar games that modern children would play with marbles. Some of the more talented adults carved animal and people figures out of wood for the children to play with. There were also plenty of games of chase and hide-and-seek being played around the camp on any given day.

And as fall arrived, the children also loved collecting acorns and turning them into little puppets by giving them arms and legs of tiny sticks and hair and clothes made from bits of loose fur they found stuck in bramblebushes.

Borta took Harry and Tom into the forest often to teach them about which mushrooms could be eaten. Harry and Tom were expert mushroom hunters already, but they humoured Borta and listened to any wisdom he shared with them. On some level, people like Borta were incredibly limited in their knowledge of the world around them. But on another level, Borta was an absolute genius. They came across a riverbed full of rocks. It took Borta only a casual glance at each stone to know which one was suitable for turning into stone tools and weapons, which ones could be used to strike together to create a spark to light a fire with, and

which ones were only good for chucking at birds in a tree to hopefully knock them out and catch them.

It took Harry and Tom quite a long time to learn that particular skill, but they did learn eventually.

They moved south for the winter, sticking close to the mountain ranges and their forests that offered some protection from the wind and was full of wood to use for fires. The tundra got bitterly cold in the winter and there was no dried mammoth manure to be found beneath the snow to burn in a fire.

They came across a large herd of caribou and the tribe was able to take down a number of them by driving them into a bottleneck of waiting hunters with their spears.

"I'm quite sure these are the Carpathian mountains," Tom said as they wandered through a forest just as the first snow began to fall. Tom was collecting all sorts of sticks and branches but for what, Harry had no idea.

"Could be," Harry said as he glanced up at the mountains, their tops hidden by the low clouds heavy with snow. A huffing noise behind them drew Harry's attention and he turned around to see an enormous bear staring at them from twenty feet away.

It was a cave bear, at least twice the size of the brown bear that lived in Europe in modern times. And it was rather thin, much thinner than it ought to be right before going into hibernation for the winter. The bear huffed and sniffed the air and right as Harry said, "Fuck," in perfect English, the bear charged.

It was scarily fast for its size and it was upon Harry before Tom had even turned around to see what was going on. Harry had only barely been able to set the foot of his spear solidly in the ground with the stone point aimed at the charging bear when the bear slammed into it with all its weight. It released a gurgling sound while swiping at Harry's leg with a huge paw. Harry's leather clothing protected him from the long claws, but the force of it still knocked him on his arse.

Then Tom was there and drove his spear into the bear between its ribs. The bear managed one last wheezy breath before it crashed to the ground, both Harry and Tom's spears sticking out of it.

"Well, looks like we got ourselves a really comfortable blanket for the winter," Harry said, his whole body trembling with shock as he tried to push himself to his feet but failing miserably.

"Are you okay?" Tom asked, yanking on Harry's arm to help him up. Harry managed to stay upright on his shaking legs while he gave Tom a tremulous smile.

"Never better. Babe, we killed a *cave bear*. With pointy sticks." Harry looked from the bear to Tom and back with wide eyes.

“A very old bear,” Tom said, though he looked plenty proud of them both once the shock wore off. The bear was indeed old, its teeth worn down, which explained why it had tried to attack them. Like most modern bears, cave bears preferred not to bother people, but to eat mostly plant matter with the occasional spawning salmon or deer fawn to supplement their diet. This bear hadn’t been able to put on enough weight to survive the winter and thus had been desperate enough for an attack.

Unfortunately, they couldn’t let the bear meat go to waste, much to Harry’s chagrin. He really did not like the taste of it. But they did get a nice, very warm blanket out of it once they got the hide tanned. And Tom made them both necklaces with the bear’s teeth and claws as something to remember their awesome kill by. And they now had a really good story to tell around the campfire, much to their tribe’s pleasure.

That winter, while holed up in their tent around a cosy fire, Tom made a few rudimentary hand bows and arrows. Now Harry understood why Tom had been collecting any feather he found along their travels. He fletched the wooden arrows as best as he could and then he tried out the weapon in the snow and came home with a few partridges and ptarmigans. The bows weren’t powerful enough to use for hunting big game, but they were perfect for taking down birds and things like rabbits and hares from a fair distance.

Tom made Harry his own bow and together they practiced and practiced and became quite good at bringing home small game that helped to see them through the winter. The members of their tribe were very curious about this new invention and a few of Harry’s kin were eager to try using a bow for themselves. Tom built more of them as quickly as he could get the materials and most people enjoyed the challenge of learning how to use them. Harry’s little brother Mok quickly became rather good at shooting pigeons straight from the sky as they flew up to get themselves to safety.

Since the fall a particular pack of wolves had started following them, eager to eat whatever animal remains the tribe left behind from their hunts.

“They’re primitive dogs,” Harry insisted as he and Tom spotted them lurking nearby once again while they were out to shoot more birds.

“They’re still wolves, darling,” Tom said while rolling his eyes.

“This is how wolves were domesticated and became dogs,” Harry said, ignoring Tom’s negativity. “And thus this particular pack of animals has now become primitive dogs because they choose to follow us around instead of acting like true wolves and go out and hunt for themselves.”

“Whatever you say,” Tom said with a bit of a resigned sigh.

Throughout the winter the pack of wolves proved most useful in alerting anyone in the vicinity when other predators approached. One night they raised hell not that far away from the camp, with a whole range of growls and barks that echoed between the trees. The next morning they found the huge tracks of cave lions in the snow that had apparently been making their way towards their camp but had been cut off by the wolf pack and driven away.

“Just like dogs guarding their owners,” Harry said with a deeply satisfied smile while he gave Tom a pointed look.

“Or just like any predator protecting their food source against other predators,” Tom countered at once, the pessimist.

No matter the reason the wolves had driven the cave lions off, Harry started actively trying to make friends with the wolves. He carried bits of meat around and any offal of freshly hunted game they didn’t eat themselves and offered it to those wolves who were brave enough to approach him.

There was one female, barely a year old by the looks of it, who seemed willing to trust Harry enough to approach him. She always kept a few feet of distance, never got close enough to touch, but she looked at Harry with intelligent eyes and patiently waited for whatever treat Harry brought along that day.

Harry called her Piltara, which meant white flower, since she had a very light coat.

Whenever Harry entered the woods to hunt, Piltara was never far behind and watched his back, letting him know at once if man or beast approached with nervous yips and barks.

At the end of winter, when they were deeper in the woods than usual with Borta to learn more about tracking game, Piltara sounded the alarm from a few yards away.

A huge woolly rhino came charging through the trees, barely looking where it was going since they had very poor eyesight. Harry, Tom and Borta were stuck in deep snow and couldn’t move away quickly enough. Harry dove to the side as Tom did the same but Borta stood no chance and was hit head on by the enormous beast.

The rhino trampled right over Borta and it soon became clear why it was in such a panic. Three huge cave lions were chasing it down. Thankfully, the lions were so focused on their prey that they paid no attention to the puny humans buried in the snow along their paths.

Once the danger had passed and the quiet returned, Harry and Tom dug themselves out of the snow and went in search of Borta. They found him face down in the snow, his skull shattered and a huge amount of blood colouring the snow red.

“Oh no,” Harry said, feeling for a pulse in his neck but already knowing Borta was dead. No one could survive such a wound.

“The rhino must have stepped right on top of his head,” Tom said quietly as he examined Borta’s body.

They made a makeshift stretcher with some saplings they cut down and they managed to haul Borta’s body back to their camp.

People fell to the snow, overcome with grief, when they saw that Borta was dead. Borta the Wise had been a beloved member of their tribe who worked tirelessly for the betterment of their people.

That evening one of the elders approached Tom and Harry. “You have only spent a short time learning from Borta, but it is important that you now become the Wise. And for that, you must be made whole.”

That was their tribe’s term for what was essentially marriage. Usually people didn’t get made whole quite as young as Harry was, who would see his seventeenth spring in a few months, but the elders were willing to make an exception for their Wise.

They were made whole on the night of the next full moon. Harry and Tom stood opposite each other under the moonlight while the elder gave them two tiny statues carved from bone that resembled them in a very basic way. Harry and Tom wrapped the statues up in a piece of fur and buried them deep into the snow, symbolizing that they would be together from that point on.

Afterwards there was some singing and dancing around a big fire, but since it was winter people did not stay outside for too long.

From that moment on, Harry and Tom officially became the Wise for their tribe. Although Borta hadn’t been able to teach them all he wanted, Harry and Tom both had a wealth of knowledge and were more than qualified for the role.

“Where did it all go wrong?” Harry asked as they lay curled up together under their bear fur blanket that night. “Same-sex couples are appreciated and accepted in this culture. Because they cannot have children of their own, they are made to be the parents of the whole tribe, more or less.”

Tom hummed thoughtfully. “Somewhere along the line some asshole decided that his imaginary god didn’t appreciate the gays and all their butt sex.”

Snorting with laughter, Harry buried his face against Tom’s chest. That remark was particularly funny because there was no butt sex to be had for them at that time. No lube meant no anal penetration and they had yet to find a good substance that could function as lube.

Tom chuckled along with Harry. “But all joking aside, I think it was a reaction to primitive religions, who were accepting of same-sex relationships. They wanted their own religion to dominate the world and in order for it to do so they decided to disagree with most of what the primitive societies and their religions stood for.”

“Imagine how nice the world might have turned out if they hadn’t done that. If same-sex couples had been accepted all throughout history,” Harry mused, a pang of regret rushing through his chest.

“I know,” Tom said and pressed a kiss to Harry’s head. “I know, darling. Let’s just enjoy the opportunities we’re getting in this life.”

In the spring, as they were getting ready to move back to the tundra to eventually hunt more mammoths, tragedy struck again.

Harry and Tom were talking to some of the elders about which routes to take to their summer hunting grounds when a few children came screaming into the camp.

“A fox bit Sila,” one of children cried as she rushed up to them. “A fox came out of nowhere and bit Sila really bad. Your wolf came, Mala, and killed the fox.”

A wave of cold dread washed over Harry. Sila was Harry’s beloved grandmother who often accompanied the children as they left the camp, to keep an eye on them. And a fox out in broad daylight attacking a human out of nowhere could only mean one thing.

“The Biting,” one of the elders said with a worried look.

“Yes,” Harry agreed in a emotionless voice. His grandmother had just been given a death sentence. And so had Piltara, most likely.

The Biting sickness, or simply The Biting was what their people called rabies. And rabies was lethal all of the time for those who didn’t immediately got the vaccine after exposure. Once symptoms showed up you died a horrible death. Only a handful of people in modern times had ever survived once it became symptomatic, and then only with very specialized health care while suffering life-long disabilities from the virus.

None of those things were available during the ice age. Harry’s grandmother was going to die a horrible death.

They found Sila sitting in the melting snow, hands covered in blood because of several deep gashes that the fox had left behind. Mok was with her but he stayed a careful distance away from her. Everyone knew about the Biting and how it spread.

“I did not touch her,” Mok said at once when Harry and Tom arrived.

Harry nodded at him and then crouched down in front of his grandmother. “I am so sorry.”

“As am I,” his grandmother whispered as she held up her bleeding hands. “It came out of nowhere, that foul beast. It bit me from behind in my leg and when I turned around it jumped up and bit my hands.” His grandmother got a sudden determined look on her face. “Better it bite me than one of the children.”

“What do you want to do?” Harry asked, his voice thick with grief and his eyes shimmering.

“I would go into the woods by myself and seek my own end, but I know that is not possible,” his grandmother said with clear regret. It wasn’t uncommon for the older people to leave the tribe in times of hunger and famine, to give the younger generations a better chance of survival. But that wasn’t an option when one was exposed to the Biting. If predators ate an infected human they would become infected themselves and continue the cycle. And no one wanted to come across a rabid cave lion or cave hyena. Harry shuddered at the thought.

“I shall no longer take food or water,” his grandmother said with quiet determination in her eyes. “Keep me company, Mala, but let me die quickly. Then burn me.”

“It shall be done,” Tom said when Harry was suddenly unable to speak. Tom put an urgent hand on Harry’s shoulder to help him up. He guided Harry a few yards away, where the dead fox lay in the slushy snow. In the treeline not far away stood Piltara, watching them closely. Her left leg was bleeding from a large gash.

“Oh no,” Harry said, tears falling across his cheeks. This was more grief than he knew what to do with. “Not her, too.”

“I will take care of it. I’ll make it quick.” Without waiting for a reply, Tom turned towards Mok. “Give me your bow and strongest arrow.”

Harry whispered a quiet goodbye to Piltara and thanked her for protecting his tribe. Then he turned his back to her because he couldn’t watch what Tom was about to do. Only a few breaths later Harry heard the swish of an arrow being released and the startled yelp before a body hit the ground.

“It’s done,” Tom said as he stepped up to Harry. “I’m so sorry. I’ll burn the animals. You look after your grandmother.”

Word had spread and more members of the tribe came rushing over. Harry had to hold his mother back as she desperately wanted to embrace her own mother.

“I will stay here,” Harry’s grandmother told anyone who suggested moving her. “I will die here. Keep me company if it pleases you, but this is where I meet my end.”

People brought her food and water, which she ignored, and furs and blankets, which she refused.

“That is one strong woman,” Tom whispered to Harry on the second day. Harry could hear the admiration in his voice. To passively commit suicide like that to save your family from infection took an enormous amount of strength.

It took Harry’s grandmother four days to die, the last one of which she was no longer conscious. Harry and his family never left her side, staying with her until the end and telling her how much they loved her and how much they were going to miss her.

They built the pyre around her body that still leaned against a tree, not wanting to risk moving her and spreading her infectious blood. They lit it and sang songs of mourning as they watched their matriarch burn.

“I’m loving this life, loving how interesting it is to live such a primitive life,” Harry whispered to Tom that night in their tent. “But then something like this happens and I’m reminded that life is ultimately brutal, especially without modern medicine.”

“Yep,” Tom mumbled in agreement. “And imagine how many people reject vaccines in modern times because they believe them to be unsafe. They have obviously never had to deal with rabies or smallpox or polio or any of the other countless infectious diseases that have killed millions over the years, and which vaccines protect against.”

“Preaching to the choir,” Harry said, a small smile tugging on his lips, no matter that he was still all sorts of heartbroken over their recent loss. One only needed to have lived one life in a time before modern medicine to understand how much of a fucking miracle cure vaccines truly were.

“I know,” Tom said, pressing an apologetic kiss to Harry’s temple. “It just pisses me off, how people can so carelessly discount the advances in modern medicine because of something unsubstantiated they read of Facebook.” Tom inhaled a deep breath, obviously trying to calm himself down. “No matter. We’re living this life now, and we will make the best of it, like we always do.”

“Yep.” Harry cuddled closer to Tom while closing his eyes. As they had learned by then, every single life had its ups and downs, some more serious than others. As it turned out, though, life got infinitely more interesting when there were woolly mammoths and cave bears involved.

Life #96: That time Harry and Tom were homeless

Chapter Notes

Some depressing themes in this one, but not every life can be rainbows and roses. Sometimes life is a struggle, even for Harry and Tom.

Thanks so much for reading! Let me know what you think. Your comments bring me more joy than I could ever possibly say.

Life #96: That time Harry and Tom were homeless

Skid Row, Los Angeles, USA, 2013

Harry woke up lying on a filthy sidewalk with a police officer looming over her, vigorously rubbing his knuckles over her sternum.

“Hey, hey, you with us?” Officer Mike asked while he removed his hand and sat back on his haunches. “You’re lucky I had naloxone, girl, or you’d be a goner.”

Licking her dry lips, Harry blinked up at Officer Mike as she tried to make sense of the many, *many* memories that rushed through her mind.

She’d died. That was the only way to get her memories back without meeting Tom. And she knew exactly how she’d died. A fentanyl overdose. Squeezing her eyes shut, Harry pushed herself up in a sitting position with trembling arms. She was a fucking fentanyl addict. What a shitshow this life already turned out to be and it had barely even started.

“I’m fine,” Harry mumbled, looking around while her eyes refused to focus. Getting clean from an opioid addiction was a fucking nightmare and that was exactly what awaited Harry.

“Inez, you almost died, man,” Dylan said, staring at her with hooded eyes. He sat against the wall a few feet away, face slack from his recent hit of fentanyl. Dylan was her ‘boyfriend’. Well, what passed for a boyfriend between two young addicts stuck in a hellhole like Skid Row. Mostly they stuck together for safety and to score together. “Lucky thing Officer Mike was patrolling this street, ‘cause you stopped breathing and everything and I didn’t know what to do.”

In other words, Dylan had been so fucking high himself that he’d watched his ‘girlfriend’ die without lifting a finger to try to help her. Yeah, that relationship, if one could even call it that, was well and truly over.

“I’m fine,” Harry said with a bit of a slur when Officer Mike tried to stop her from getting to her feet.

“Take your time, Inez,” Officer Mike said, giving her a stern look. “Is this your first time OD-ing?”

Harry nodded as she stood on unsteady legs. “And it’s gonna be my last,” she quietly vowed.

Officer Mike didn’t look like he believed her, but then again, he must have heard that particular promise thousands of times before from Skid Row’s inhabitants. Very few ever actually stuck by that promise. There were quite a few police officers that regularly patrolled Skid Row, but most of them had little sympathy for the homeless population there. Officer Mike, a black man who stood well over six feet tall, was one of the exceptions. He cared about what he saw around him and he always approached everyone he met with kindness, unless they gave him a reason to be unkind.

Harry stared down at the sidewalk as the reality of her current life sank in. She was a homeless fentanyl addict. She had nothing to her name, except the clothes on her back. She didn’t even have a bag with some extra clothes and personal stuff anymore, since she’d gotten mugged a few days earlier.

“Try to get in a program,” Officer Mike said with a smile full of careful optimism. “There’s a lot of rehab places around the city. Go to the connection point to sign up for one.” And with that, Officer Mike turned around and continued his patrol of Los Angeles’ containment zone for the homeless, the addicts and the mentally ill.

Because that is what Skid Row was. An open air prison without walls or fences for those the rest of the city rather didn’t find themselves confronted with. It sat smack dab between the more desirable districts of downtown Los Angeles. It was a run down area with little housing and few thriving businesses. Every sidewalk was lined with tents and other makeshift shelters constructed from blue tarps and whatever the owner could find lying around the street. There was garbage everywhere, so there was plenty to use for those seeking construction materials. And since there were very few public bathrooms, there was human waste everywhere. You couldn’t walk down any sidewalk without stepping in human shit.

Honestly, Harry and Tom had stayed in third world refugee camps that were cleaner and better equipped than Skid Row.

There were a variety of shelters and charity organizations around. The shelters usually filled up fast and were often overcrowded. They were depressing places to stay, but Harry realized that her best bet was to get a bed in a shelter for the coming days anyway. She’d be going through opioid withdrawal soon and that wouldn’t be pretty.

As Harry stumbled through the filthy streets of Skid Row while looking for the nearest shelter, she took stock of her life so far. She’d been born Inez De La Fuente to an abusive mother and an absent father. Harry had worked her arse off in school, knowing that getting into a college was her best chance of escaping her horrible mother, who blamed her daughter for every little thing that went wrong in their lives. Harry had a younger brother, Ramon, who her mother treated better than the average lackey treated their sovereign.

Thankfully, Harry had received a partial scholarship for UCLA. Working a parttime job in a high end restaurant waiting tables made it possible for Harry to attend college without taking

out a loan.

But three months in, as Harry cycled across the campus, she slipped in a puddle and crashed against the sidewalk. She blacked out briefly and one very expensive ambulance ride later, she learned that she had a broken collarbone, which hurt like a bitch. They gave her a sling and a generous amount of prescription medication to deal with the pain.

And those pills, those amazing little pills, made Harry feel better than she'd ever done in her entire life. She went back to her doctor's office for refills a few times, until they cut her off, saying they were worried about addiction.

Yeah, they were a bit too late with that.

At that point, Harry was well and truly addicted to Oxycontin, the prescription opioid responsible for the epidemic of addiction that was sweeping across the nation. Harry came across a few enterprising students who sold Oxy tablets, and she spent every dollar she had buying more and more of them. Because that was the thing about opioids. The more you used, the more you needed to feel good. And after a while, you didn't even feel really good anymore whenever you used. You just needed it to keep the pain of withdrawal at bay.

Soon enough, the Oxy tablets became too expensive and Harry was introduced to fentanyl, the synthetic opioid that had basically driven heroin out of the marketplace. Heroin came from plants that had to be grown and processed and then smuggled around the world. Fentanyl was made in a laboratory and because it was up to fifty times stronger than heroin, it took up a lot less space while it was smuggled across borders.

But therein also existed the real danger of fentanyl. It was so strong that only a tiny bit could kill you. And when buying it on the streets it was impossible to say how strong it was exactly, so every time you used you played fentanyl roulette.

For four months, Harry had gotten extremely lucky. Until that luck finally ran out and she found herself lying dead on the shitty pavements of Skid Row.

It was terrifying how fast Harry's entire life had collapsed around her until nothing remained. She'd lost her job, her student housing, her scholarship and her position at UCLA. She'd lost everything she'd ever owned. And now, she'd even lost her life, all because some rich, white people were determined to become even richer by flooding the country with a highly addictive painkiller that was being subscribed for any kind of ache or pain, no matter the chance of developing an addiction in the patients.

Harry shook her head. What was done was done. Now she needed to think about her future, such as it was, and the first step to that was dealing with her withdrawal. She'd been addicted to heroin before so at least she knew what to expect. At least a week, if not two, of sheer, physical hell, the kind that made you promise your first-born to anyone just to make the pain stop.

Yeah, Harry was really looking forward to that. Not.

Harry reached the connection point, which was an initiative from some of the bigger charities that worked around Skid Row. It was a central place where those in need of help could sign up for a number of programs that were available.

There was a line to get in that went around the block. Sighing, Harry got in line because she didn't have anywhere else to go anyway.

As she stood there, surrounded by the people society had cast aside, she realized she'd probably never been in such a miserable situation before in any of her lives. Harry and Tom had lost homes before. Once a fire had destroyed their home and everything in it. But they'd been able to stay in their parents' house until the insurance came through and paid for temporary housing until their home could be rebuilt.

Harry and Tom had also faced last minute evictions, but during those times they'd been able to live in their car for a few weeks until they found something else.

Even the times they had to flee their homes for a number of reasons, from political to natural disasters, there had always been hope. A light at the end of the tunnel.

Now, Harry couldn't even see a tunnel. All she could see in front of her was a big, gaping black hole that offered no hope whatsoever. She had nothing. And she had no one to fall back on. She refused to get in contact with her abusive mother. She'd rather starve in the streets than subject herself to such psychological and physical abuse again. And the few friends she'd made in college had dropped her once it became clear she'd become an addict who cared only about her next hit.

And most importantly, Harry didn't have Tom. She was in a world of misery and trouble, and she didn't even have her soulmate to help her through it.

Their previous few lives had been very ordinary. Their last life they'd both been female and they'd opened up a very successful tattoo shop in Luxemburg where they were born. The life before that they'd been wizards in Sri Lanka in the 1700s. And the life before that they were British and Harry met Tom when he'd been in the process of setting up a social media start-up in the 2000s. They'd worked their behinds off for that company but in the end they'd ended up billionaires. That had been a very fun life with lots of excesses.

So yeah, Harry figured that they were due a shitty life. They happened every now and then, nothing to do about it but try to make the best of them.

Harry stood in line for hours, the sun bearing down on her while her body ached more and more. The naloxone Officer Mike had given her had erased every trace of fentanyl from her body so she was well and truly going into withdrawal.

Someone handed out care packages to everyone who stood in line. It was a plastic bag with a few personal care items, an apple and a banana, a few granola bars and two bottles of water. Harry ignored the food for now, since she was already starting to feel nauseous, but she opened a bottle of water and took a few large gulps.

By the time Harry got to the door of the building, hours had passed. She'd emptied both water bottles and desperately had to pee.

"I'm so sorry," the lady behind the nearest desk said as Harry shuffled inside and asked for the loo. "We don't have public bathrooms."

Right, so holding it was the only option. Harry sat down in front of the desk of someone named 'Florence', according to the nametag on her blouse. She was a pale woman in her forties, who looked very much like she'd lived in suburbia her entire life.

"What can I help you with today?" Florence asked in an upbeat voice while giving Harry a bright smile that definitely didn't reach her eyes.

"Er... everything," Harry said, because she had nothing. She needed everything. "The most pressing thing is definitely rehab."

Florence shuffled a few papers on her desk. "When did you last use?"

"Today, earlier. I overdosed and got naloxone from Officer Mike. Now I want to get clean," Harry said, bouncing in her seat. She really had to fucking pee.

"Right," Florence said with a dubious look. "I wish I could help you, but all the rehabs have waiting lists. Most for about a year and a half."

Harry blinked. "Excuse me? I have to wait one and a half years for a spot in rehab?" When Florence nodded, Harry said, "How about a spot in a shelter? For a week or so?"

"I'm sorry, but shelters don't want people going through withdrawal," Florence said, again with that fucking condescending look. "We can look for a place after you're clean, if you like?"

"How about food stamps? Or some other state benefit? Affordable housing?" Harry gave Florence an expectant look.

"I'm sorry. They're not accepting anymore applications for food stamps this year. You can try next year. I can give you the location of a nearby foodbank," Florence said with a sad little tilt of her head. "There is a fifteen year waiting list for affordable housing in Los Angeles. I can help you to sign up for that, though."

Well, that was just absolutely great, wasn't it? There was nothing available to actually help her. "I really need to pee," Harry muttered, giving Florence a desperate look. "Can I go outside real quick and then come back?"

"I'm sorry," Florence said, and Harry wanted to punch her in her fucking face for all those useless apologies. "But if you leave you give up your turn and you'll have to get back in line."

"Jesus," Harry sighed and squeezed her thighs together. Her entire body was aching at this point while her head was pounding. "Okay, I need to sort out my documentation. I've lost everything."

“We can help with that,” Florence said while sitting up a bit. She seemed happy enough to finally be able to do something. “What do you need exactly?”

“Birth certificate, driver’s license.” Harry bounced in her seat again. A spasm shot through her body, leaving a trail of pain behind.

“You have to visit the DMV for your driver’s license,” Florence said, shuffling more paperwork around. “But you can fill out a request for a copy of your birth certificate online.” Florence pulled the keyboard of her computer closer and started tapping the keys while staring at the screen. She worked about as fast as the average tortoise, much to Harry’s frustration.

Another spasm wrecked Harry’s body and she doubled over, gritting her teeth. The next thing she felt was warm liquid running down her thighs and calves. For fuck’s sakes, she’d pissed herself. While her entire body flushed with instant embarrassment, Harry jumped up and ran out of the building like a whole herd of dementors were on her heels. She didn’t stop running until she was a few blocks away.

Well, that had been absolutely useless. Harry stood leaning against a wall, head tipped back as she stared up at the clear sky. In her hurry she’d forgotten her little care package, so now she didn’t even have anything to eat. The last time she’d showered was at least two weeks ago and her clothes hadn’t been washed in months. And now she had pissed all over herself, just to add to her misery.

Harry squeezed her eyes shut. She would not cry. She’d lived through worse things. She’d lived through World War One and World War Two. She’d lived through the Black Death. She’d lived through famines and natural disasters.

And yet, standing there, filthy and alone, Harry didn’t think she’d ever felt worse before. Because during all those other horrific situations, she’d always been regarded as human by those around her. As someone worthy of help and support.

Now, she knew only too well, she was seen as subhuman. An addict. Homeless. Someone with mental health issues. Someone society would sooner forget about than offer any substantial help to.

Harry was well and truly on her own, with nothing to her name but the soiled clothes she was wearing, and with no one to fall back on.

That is what made this situation so deeply miserable and depressing.

Eventually, Harry pushed herself away from the wall and found a recessed doorway of a boarded up building. She sat down there, pulling up her knees and waiting for the real pain to start. It started after midnight. Harry buried her face against her arms, gritting her teeth while desperately ignoring the whispered words of her addiction in her head.

Just one Oxy would take the edge off... you could just use Oxy until you found Tom, that wouldn't be so bad, Oxy is far less bad than fentanyl...just get one Oxy and then you could get clean after that...Oxy is expensive, though, so you could also do some fentanyl, that's

much cheaper... just until you find Tom, just to keep yourself together, once you find Tom it will be easy to get clean...

It went on and on and on, the whole fucking night as Harry's body was shaking and trembling, her stomach rolling and her head pounding. One moment she got sweats so bad her entire shirt soaked through and the next she couldn't stop shivering.

The sun rose and Harry stayed put, willing herself to stay put, telling herself in the harshest language she knew to stay put, to not go looking for anything or anyone. Just stay there.

All she had to do was find Dylan, he'd have something to take the edge off...just one hit, just once more, just one pill, just one needle, just this once, to take the edge off, to take the pain away, to make you forget the abuse, to make you feel human again... Dylan would have something, he'd share it with you, all you have to do is go find him...

Harry stayed put, shaking and trembling and groaning and *fighting*. It was a battle, make no mistake, and Harry was determined to win it.

Because Harry couldn't bear to meet Tom in this life and have to explain to him that Harry was addicted to drugs. Again.

Just one Oxy, just find Dylan, just this once to take the edge off, you can get clean later, Tom isn't here now, he would never have to know that you used again even after you got your memories back...just one Oxy...

Harry wasn't sure how much time passed. She stayed put and she fought and day turned to night, and night turned to day.

"Would you like a care package?" A middle-aged man offered a plastic bag to Harry. His shirt held the logo of some church that did charity work in the area.

"Yeah," Harry managed to say, her throat dry and her voice hoarse. "Thanks." Harry wasn't hungry in the slightest, but she was absolutely parched. She found two bottles of water in the bag and she downed them both, one after another.

Time passed and the next thing Harry knew was Officer Mike crouching down in front of her, his uniform tightening around his biceps as he gave her a long look. "Inez. You look like shit."

"Feel like shit, too," Harry said with a slow grin, her dry lips cracking. "But I'm still clean."

Officer Mike's eyes brightened at hearing that. "Good girl. You been here the whole time? Why didn't you go to a shelter?"

"Wouldn't take me," Harry mumbled. She could only imagine how badly she must smell and she pitied Officer Mike that he had to put up with it.

"Bullshit," Officer Mike said, standing up. "Come with me, I'll get you a spot at the Mission. Get you something to eat and a nice shower. You earned that."

Inexplicably, Harry's eyes filled with tears and she quickly looked down as she pushed herself up. Her entire body still ached but at least most of the shaking and trembling had stopped. "Shower sounds good."

Officer Mike led the way and Harry stumbled after him. It was dark out, but lots of people were still out and about on the streets, complaining and hustling and dealing drugs. They didn't care that a cop walked by, as cops generally didn't go after drugs in Skid Row. Officer Mike led them to a side door of the Mission, Skid Row's biggest shelter. He knocked a few times and gave the woman who answered a charming smile.

"Mike, good to see you," the woman said, clearly pleased to see Mike again.

"Got a girl here that needs a place to stay. She just got clean." Officer Mike gestured at Harry, who stood to the side, slightly hunched over. "Can you hook her up with a shower and some clothes? As favour for me?"

The woman gave Officer Mike a knowing look. Apparently this wasn't the first time he'd used his charms to get something from her. "Yeah, all right. What's your name, girl?"

"Inez," Harry mumbled as she shuffled closer.

"I'm Patty. Come on in. Bye, Mike." Patty was a no-nonsense kind of woman, which Harry appreciated. "I can get you a shower, a meal and a sleeping mat on the floor. All beds are full. Also, we have clothes if you need them."

"I need everything," Harry said, refusing to feel shame for her situation. She was clean now, the worst of the withdrawal was over and she was determined to stay clean and fix her life as soon as possible.

Patty first led Harry to a room full of piles of clothes. Harry dug around and selected jeans shorts, one pair of regular jeans, a few shirts and a hoodie. She also found a few pairs of new socks. She then selected a pair of sneakers in her size that seemed barely worn, since her own shoes smelled like piss. She also found a backpack to put everything in. Next was the bathroom. The shower was basic but absolutely heavenly. Harry used the shampoo and soap from her care package and washed herself top to bottom multiple times. Afterwards she got dressed in clean clothes and she used the simple comb Patty gave her to comb her long hair.

She felt like a new woman when she left the bathroom. It was amazing how good you could feel from simply getting clean again after being filthy for a long time.

Dinner was a bowl of chicken soup with a few slices of buttered bread. Harry devoured it all because she hadn't eaten in days and her appetite was slowly returning. Since her body was still going through the last stages of withdrawal, Harry retired to the mat she'd been assigned in a crowded dormitory. She crawled under the simple blanket, clutching her new bag with all her possessions to her belly. Even the crying of a child didn't keep her awake and she succumbed to some much needed sleep.

The next morning, Harry used the bathroom, which took a while. Nothing gave you constipation like using opioids did. Now that Harry had stopped using, her bowels seemed

ready for a much needed cleaning, which would have freaked Harry out if she wasn't already familiar with the process.

Afterwards she washed up and brushed her teeth and then went to the main dining hall where they served oatmeal and coffee for breakfast. And then everybody was expected to leave, but Harry was determined to get back there in time for securing a bed again that night.

Once Harry stood on the sidewalk in front of the Mission, she was at a loss of what to do. First, she needed to make money. Secondly, she needed to secure herself some transportation, so she could find a real job and make even more money. And eventually, she could buy herself a cheap car to live in. And then she could get the fuck out of Skid Row.

No, no, she was getting ahead of herself. First she needed to get her paperwork in order. How the hell was she ever going to buy a car when she didn't have a valid driver's licence on her person. Harry dreaded going back to the connection point, though, after having pissed all over their chair and floor. But there must be other charities around that could help with stuff like that.

Harry wandered around for a while, looking at every single building she passed, hoping to find some charity that would let her in. Eventually she found a building that sported the same church logo as had been on the shirt of the guy who gave her a care package. Harry pushed the door open to find a few other people waiting inside. She joined them, standing to the side. Eventually she was approached by an older man.

"I need help sorting my paperwork out. I lost everything," Harry said, giving the guy a pleading look.

"We can help with that," the man assured her as they sat down at a desk. "You're not the first person who needed everything replaced."

Thankfully this man was a bit more competent with a computer and soon enough Harry had put in a request for a copy of her birth certificate.

"Once you have that," the man told her, "We can fill out an application for a replacement driver's licence and take you to the DMV to file it. We go once a week with a van for those who need it."

"Thanks." Harry was even more delighted when they offered her lunch as well after that. It came with a small monologue about what an awesome guy Jesus was, but Harry was happy to put up with that in exchange for some much needed practical help.

After lunch Harry went back to the streets. She saw a woman walk by hauling a large bag of cans. That was an easy way to make some money while she was waiting for her paperwork. People paid deposits of a nickel or dime on beer and soda cans and bottles. They could be redeemed fairly easily. There was a recycling point at the edge of Skid Row, Harry was sure. And so Harry started going through the trash, looking for anything that could be redeemed for money. Others had already been picking over everything, so the bounty was slim, but Harry still found a few things. She used a plastic bag she found and worked her way across the streets in the general direction of the recycling centre.

“Inez!”

Harry looked up as she tucked a cracked cola can in her bag.

Dylan came hurrying towards her from the other side of the street. “Inez. Where you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.” Dylan held out a small, folded piece of foil. “I got some for us.”

Tom didn’t need to know, just one hit, just this once, you could always quit afterwards, you could quit when you meet Tom, just this once, it really doesn’t matter if you use again, you can always get clean later...

Harry slapped the bit of foil from Dylan’s hand with a shudder. She refused to give into her addiction, no matter how convincing that little voice in her head seemed.

“What the fuck?” Dylan quickly picked up the piece of foil from the sidewalk. “What got into you, bitch?”

“I’m clean,” Harry said, even though a large part of her really wanted to take Dylan up on his offer. “And I’m staying clean. We’re through.” And without looking back, Harry went along her way, picking up a discarded water bottle to add to her bag. It was one of the hardest things she’d ever done, in any of her lives.

Addiction was a dreadful thing. It came in all shapes and sizes, and Harry was intimately familiar with many of them. There had been the extravagant drug and alcohol addictions in life number six, when he’d been a rockstar. But during different lives Harry had also struggled with gambling addiction, food addiction, porn addiction, gaming addiction, shopping addiction, and once a rather memorable sex addiction. They might not have much in common at first glance, but all addictions were fed by emotions. The stronger the emotions, the stronger the addiction.

And in Harry’s case, her addiction now was directly fed by her childhood trauma. That was the reason Harry had such a strong response to using prescription opioids. Those fucking pills numbed the psychological pain Harry dealt with on a daily basis. For the first time in her life, Harry was free from pain and that was a very strong incentive to keep using those fucking pills.

But now Harry had her memories back and she at least understood the mechanics of addiction. Understood that quitting an addiction was a process that took time. It was a journey without a destination. There was never going to be a moment in this life when Harry could say that she was no longer an addict. The chance of a relapse was very real and could happen years after getting clean if one became complacent.

No, getting clean was a long, tiresome process. Every step Harry now took was one step in which she was clean. Every minute that passed was a minute in which she wasn’t using. Every hour was one in which Harry proved stronger than the drugs. And every day that Harry stayed away from opioids was a day in which Harry faced her trauma head on instead of trying to numb it with fentanyl.

One step at a time. Just one more step.

By the time Harry got to the recycling centre she had her bag full of cans and bottles. She loaded them all in the machine and by the end she had just under seven dollars. Not a huge amount, but it was seven dollars more than she'd had before. And she'd kept herself busy instead of doing nothing but listen to the addiction whispering in her head.

And that is what Harry did for the rest of the week. In the evening she went back to the Mission for a meal, a shower and a bed to sleep in. It was loud and crowded and smelly, but it was better than sleeping on the streets. Harry kept to herself, kept the money she made always out of sight in her pants and kept her backpack with her at all times.

On the streets, no one could be trusted. An addict would absolutely rob their best friend, their own mother and even their own child, let alone a neighbour in a homeless shelter.

By the end of the week, Harry had earned almost 120 dollars with recycling. That was more money she'd seen in months. She didn't spend it, though. No, she had plans for that money.

The church charity had received Harry's birth certificate, which meant that Harry was ready to sort out her driver's licence. The charity drove Harry and a few others to the DMV where they got to spend the day in bureaucratic hell, but by the end of that day Harry had a temporary licence and could expect the real licence to show up in the mail within 3 to 4 weeks.

That meant a few more weeks of recycling and earning a bit of cash to start her off with. As Harry walked through the entire district and beyond, looking for more cans and bottles, she came across quite a few more charities. Plenty of them gave out care packages, with some even containing underwear and female hygiene products. Harry hadn't had her period in months, because she'd been losing a lot of weight while she was shooting up. But she expected that to make a return any day now, so having a stash of pads was nice. Another charity did free haircuts, which Harry got. Her hair was long, straight and black, but she did have lots of split ends, so she could do with a trim.

And one charity gave out free cell phones. You needed to have a sponsor who'd vouch you needed that phone and that you weren't just a junkie who would sell that phone for their next hit the second they stepped outside the building. Harry brought Officer Mike along, who happily vouched for her. And that's how Harry got her very own smartphone from some vague brand no one had ever heard of. Harry didn't care, though. She didn't have enough money yet for a phone plan, but the Mission had free Wi-Fi, so Harry could browse her phone, looking for job opportunities for someone in her position.

A month later Harry had just over five hundred bucks and a full driver's licence. She could now sign up for some gig work. Harry reactivated her PayPal account and signed up for various food delivery apps. Then she bought a second-hand bicycle, cycled to a nearby bank to open an account and deposited some of her hard-earned money in there. She used that bank account to finally sign up for a phone plan of her own.

Now she was in business to cycle around downtown Los Angeles, delivering food to all the office workers there. Harry started early, in time for breakfast, and she worked through lunch

all the way to dinner. It wasn't as if she had anything else to do.

The first week, Harry made over a thousand dollars. She just about broke down and cried when that money appeared in her account. If she worked like that for another month or two she'd have enough money to buy a pretty decent car to live in. And once she had a car, she could do deliveries on an even wider scale. She could even do some grocery deliveries and see if that paid better or not. Harry considered buying a tent so she could leave the shelter behind, but then she'd have to haul that tent around with her during the day on her bicycle. Leaving a tent unattended for that long was asking for it to be destroyed or stolen.

So, the shelter it was, at least until Harry could get a car.

The Mission let Harry park her bike in the back of their building, thankfully, so Harry didn't have to worry about it being stolen.

Officer Mike was talking to some folks on the sidewalk in front of the mission and Harry gave him a thumb's up, as she always did when she saw him. "Still clean!" she shouted with a huge grin.

"Still proud of you!" Officer Mike shouted back with a thumb's up of his own.

Harry loved that guy. There was no shortage of asshole cops around, but Officer Mike was definitely one of the good guys who cared not just for his job, but also for the people he served.

There was a line for dinner and Harry got in it, standing behind a young Indian woman. The woman turned around to see who was standing behind her and Harry gasped as the familiar rush of recognition swept through her.

Before she knew what she was doing, Harry threw herself into Tom's arms and started crying uncontrollably. Seriously, she couldn't stop bawling. Tom tightened her arms around Harry and shushed her, rubbing her back until Harry finally managed to catch her breath. It wasn't until Harry pulled back to look at Tom that she noticed that Tom's face was horribly bruised. One eye was even swollen shut.

"What happened?" Harry asked, staring at Tom in shock. Had she been mugged on the streets?

"An unhappy marriage," Tom said diplomatically while Harry's mouth dropped open even further. "My beloved husband firmly believes he can solve conflicts with his fists instead of with his words."

"That fucking asshole," Harry said, previous sentimental mood quickly forgotten. She was ready to kill Tom's useless fucking husband. It wouldn't be the first time Harry did that to anyone who thought they could abuse Tom.

"I'm safe now," Tom quickly said, grabbing hold of Harry's hand as though to physically keep her there, lest Harry run off to murder her abusive dick of husband. "I tried going to

shelters for abused women, but they were all full. They sent me here instead. I only arrived this afternoon.”

“They sent an abused woman to Skid Row? What the fuck is wrong with this country, seriously?” Harry said in a harsh whisper, her whole body taut with rage. “Officer Mike is standing right outside, in case you want to report your asshole husband to the police.”

Tom shook her head, much to Harry’s quiet outrage. “I just want to get away from him. You know how these things go, Harry. He’s a respected man with plenty of money for good lawyers. He’s not going to go to prison because he punched his wife in the face.” Tom sighed and shook her head again. She looked so fucking defeated. Harry hated it.

“We’re together now,” Tom said, giving Harry’s hand a comforting squeeze. “That’s all that matters. We’ll figure it out from here. I’m Noor Pradhan, by the way.”

“Inez De La Fuente. Please tell me you’re at least divorcing that horrid man.” Harry gave Tom a very pointed look as they shuffled along in the line.

“I’m planning to, yes, but I need to hire a lawyer and I have no money.” Tom sighed and once again shook her head, her long, black braid swinging across her back. She seemed to be in a lot of denial about her own circumstances. “My family is useless and won’t help me. After I told my parents about the abuse, they suggested it must be something I did wrong to trigger such a response. They insisted I not get a divorce, because that would bring shame on the family.”

“Arranged marriage?” Harry guessed. She was intimately aware of the kind of expectations most Indian parents put on their children, having been Indian in a few lives.

“More or less,” Tom said with a shrug. “My parents introduced us and he seemed like a very charming man from a very respectable family. He had a good job and he seemed eager to marry me, so I wasn’t opposed to marrying him.” Tom glanced down, staring at her shoes as she continued. “He changed after the wedding. Became demanding and controlling and eventually he became violent.”

“I’m so sorry,” Harry whispered and took a step closer to Tom to keep their conversation private. “I’ve got some money in the bank and I’m working, so I’m making more every day. You could work there, too. Meal delivery on a bicycle.”

“That is not a bad idea,” Tom said, expression brightening.

“We’ll get you a bicycle and then you can get started right away.” A huge wave of warmth filled Harry, now that Tom was there with him. They had each other, they had a plan and they’d figure it all out in the end. “I’m saving for a car to live in, get out of the shelter.”

Tom pushed her two bags forward with her foot as they reached the counter where they each grabbed a tray. They were served a bowl of chili and some cornbread and a small container of yoghurt.

Once they were seated at a table, Tom asked, “How did you end up here?”

Harry sighed and stirred her spoon around in her chili. “Short answer is a fentanyl addiction from prescription opioids. I’ll tell you the long answer later because I’m starving.” When Harry noticed Tom’s worried look, she quickly added, “I’m clean now. I overdosed, got my memories back and I haven’t used since then.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” Tom said and she gave Harry a smile that shone brighter than any sun. Yeah, staying clean was worth it for that response alone.

They found beds near each other and Harry slept better that night than she’d done in a very long time.

The next day, Harry gave Tom some money so she could buy a bicycle. Soon enough, Tom was also cruising around Downtown Los Angeles, working hard and making an honest living. After the first week, when Tom had some money in her own account, she approached a divorce lawyer, to get the whole procedure started. She also filed for a restraining order against her husband, because she doubted the man would let her go quietly. Harry had snapped pictures of Tom’s bruises with her phone the day they met, so she had some evidence. The judge granted the restraining order without any fuss.

Tom did not make many demands during the divorce proceedings. Her husband was reasonably well off but Tom didn’t try to take him to the cleaners. Her lawyer insisted that she’d ask for a bit of monetary compensation and in the end Tom was awarded twenty-five thousand dollars.

“We can buy a really nice car!” Harry said outside of the lawyer’s office where Tom had gotten the news from her lawyer. “Or we can buy a decent car for deliveries and a decent RV to live in.” They had a pretty nice chunk of money in their bank accounts now, after a few months of steady working, but they’d wanted to wait until the divorce got through before committing to a future.

“I’ve been thinking,” Tom said instead of going along with Harry’s plan. “I really want to get away from Los Angeles. From California, even.” Harry understood why. Even though her ex-husband hadn’t been able to find her hiding out in Skid Row of all places, he had been looking for her, refusing to give up. Tom’s friends and cousins had texted her plenty of warnings.

“How about we get our commercial driver’s licences?” Tom said to Harry with raised eyebrows, hope shining in her eyes. “We’d have a home and a steady job all in one, and we’d be travelling across the country.”

“That’s actually a brilliant idea,” Harry said, giving Tom a quick hug, followed by a long kiss. They were of a similar height, both not very tall. They’d been truckdrivers before, on multiple occasions. Driving a semitruck for a few years was a way to make an honest living whenever they needed a job quickly. And driving as a team was better than only one of them driving a truck and being away from home for weeks on end. And trucking companies were always eager to hire established teams.

They signed up for their commercial driver’s licences and since they were experienced truck drivers they passed the tests with no problems. They quickly found work since truckers were

always needed. Tom fudged the paperwork a bit, making it seem that they had experience in that life, since they didn't want to spend weeks driving with other people to learn all the ropes they already knew. They also bought a ten-year-old minivan for a few thousand dollars, so they had transportation to get around town. It also gave them a place to stay in while they weren't driving in their truck. They could park it in the parking lot of the trucking company when they weren't using it.

Their last day in skid row, they sold their bicycles for next to nothing to a family with three kids who'd recently moved into the shelter. They explained how they'd been making money, and the parents were eager to try meal delivery to earn extra money. The parents both worked minimum wage jobs but that didn't earn them enough anymore to afford a place to live in Los Angeles. They'd applied for every assistance program they could, but everything was full.

That was something that Harry had learned first hand by living in Skid Row. There wasn't one reason that people ended up there. Some people, like Harry, became addicted to drugs and lost everything. Others desperately needed mental health services that no longer existed. Only those that could pay out of pocket could afford to see a psychiatrist and get much needed medication for depression or bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Those who couldn't afford that ended up in places like Skid Row. Some people needed to escape desperate situations, like Tom. And sometimes people did everything right and worked long hours and still couldn't afford to pay rent.

That was the whole problem with the homelessness crisis, as many called it. There wasn't one answer to its many problems. There wasn't one way to fix it. The people in Skid Row desperately needed rehab and affordable housing and affordable health care of all kinds.

Harry had been able to haul herself out of that pit thanks to her memories of better lives and thanks to the help of some genuinely good people.

When they walked towards their minivan, parked a street away from the Mission, they ran into Officer Mike.

"Still clean!" Harry said with her usual thumb's up.

"Still proud of you!" Officer Mike replied, like he always did. "You heading out?"

"Yep. We start driving our truck tomorrow," Tom said, patting the roof of their red minivan, in which they'd be sleeping that night. They'd ripped out the backseats and put down a few thick mats in the back that afternoon.

"Good. Don't come back." Officer Mike gave Harry a dark look, his face suddenly utterly serious. "I once met a girl just like you, Inez. She came here hooked on fent and she got in a program and got clean. She was so proud of herself that she came back here to share the good news. Within hours she was using again." Officer Mike gestured with his thumb towards a tent across the street. "She's living in that tent still today. Leave and don't ever come back."

"We won't," Harry said with a solemn nod. She'd managed to stay clean so far, but she was well aware that she was still an addict and that a relapse could happen at any time. Driving a

truck across America would certainly help to keep her away from risky places with a lot of users like Skid Row. “Thanks for everything, Mike.”

“You’re welcome,” Officer Mike said with a crooked grin. “You girls take care of each other. Now get the fuck out of here.”

Harry had to wipe away a few tears as she stepped into the passenger’s seat. She loved that guy and she was going to miss him.

“Ready?” Tom asked as she put the car in drive.

“Yeah,” Harry said, inhaling a deep breath. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. We still need to buy some stuff. A porta potti for one because we need a place to pee in that truck. And an electric skillet and an electric kettle, because we need to be able to make tea and some hot food.”

Tom smiled at her as she drove out of Skid Row for good. “We’ll do some shopping now and whatever else we need we’ll pick up on the road.”

Looking over her shoulder, Harry saw the tents on the sidewalk get smaller and smaller as they continued on. The next chapter of their current life had started. They’d drive a truck for a few years, and after that they’d see what they’d do. Maybe they’d manage to get into expedited shipping, which paid better than team driving a semitruck. Or maybe they’d save up enough money to buy a nice little farmstead somewhere, where they could set up some online business while they kept some chickens and grew some food.

The future was full of possibilities and as long as Harry and Tom were together, they’d figure it out.

Life # 20: That time Harry and Tom were dog groomers

Chapter Notes

This was an interesting vignette to write because it's still quite early on in their rebirths. So they still have a lot of questions and insecurities about their situation, which was interesting to explore.

I hope you'll enjoy it. Let me know what you think. Your comments keep me happy and inspired.

Life # 20: That time Harry and Tom were dog groomers

Innsbruck, Austria, 1985

"I cannot believe it's come to this," Tom muttered as she moved the clippers over the small dog's back. "I used to be a feared Dark Lord. Now look at me. I'm grooming a Shit Zu."

Harry snorted and wiped her forearm across her forehead to get rid of some sweat. "You mean Shih Tzu. And stop complaining. I thought you were done being a Dark Lord after that disastrous attempt twenty lives ago." Harry studiously avoided Tom's affronted gaze, though she was unable to hold back a grin. Who knew that one day Harry Potter would be able to joke around with Tom Riddle about being Lord Voldemort?

They truly had come a long way in the twenty lives they'd led so far and it frequently still amazed Harry that they'd eventually had become friends with the person who'd caused them so much grief in their first life. It had taken ten lives before they'd called each other a friend but since that moment their relationship had grown in ways that Harry could never have imagined. They'd even gotten married and raised a family together in life number 15 and 18.

Who'd have thought? The Dark Lord who'd once taken Harry's family away from him had given him two whole new, loving families in return.

Tom rolled her eyes but kept suspiciously silent as she continued to shave the small dog on her table.

"Do you want my dog instead?" Harry was soaked pretty much top to bottom as she was busy deshedding a massive St Bernhard named Ruben that barely fit in the specialized metal bathing tub.

Tom gave Harry a careful look before shaking her head and turning her attention back to her own canine customer. Some of Tom's red curls had come loose from her ponytail and it gave her an adorably frazzled look. "I'll stick to my Shit Zu, thank you. I'm just saying that as far as career choices go, this isn't something I'd ever expected I'd end up doing."

Harry turned the water back on and vigorously moved the nozzle across the St Bernhard's side. Large, wet clumps of hair fell to the bathing tub floor. "At least we have a normal life and a career this time."

"There is that," Tom said quietly in absolute agreement, head ducked as she concentrated on shaving her dog's front legs.

Their previous life, number 19, they'd met in 2077 as young adults in Portugal, where they'd both been born. Well, what had been left of Portugal, because some five years prior the world had pretty much ended in a nuclear holocaust. A couple of countries got in a pissing match, one crazy leader pressed the red button, other crazy leaders followed his example and that was all it took to create an apocalypse filled with destruction and radiation, quickly followed by a nuclear winter that lasted for years. Harry and Tom had both been men and they'd tried to eke out an existence for a few decades in a world that was far too cold and far too empty. Eventually, when it became clear that Tom had gotten cancer, probably in his bones, they'd both ended it with a quick slash to their wrists.

It had been an interesting experience, to say the least. It had also been their first time living in a world that was no longer recognizable as the type of human society they'd been used to. All central governments the world over were gone, with only small, local communities barely hanging on through famine and disease.

So it had been a bit of a relief to be reborn in Austria in fairly modern times. They had met a few years prior, when Tom had been fresh out of school and working the reception desk of a small hotel. Harry had been training as an official dog groomer at that point and had persuaded Tom to join her so they could eventually start their own little business. They now had a busy grooming salon attached to their small home on the outskirts of Innsbruck, one of Austria's most beautiful cities. Yeah, as far as Harry was concerned, they had gotten plenty lucky this time around.

"If you want to blame anyone," Harry said as she raked her fingers through the St Bernhard's wet tail, "Blame my mother. She put me up to this."

"As though you need any encouragement to play with dogs," Tom mumbled, though she gave Harry a rather fond look over the head of the Shih Tzu.

Harry chuckled and turned off the water. This was as good as she was going to get her dog. "Perhaps that is why I was born the daughter of Austria's most fanatical Pomeranian breeder this life." Harry's mother, who was a lovely woman for the most part, took being a pedigree breeder to a whole other level. Every minute of every day was spent on her many Pomeranians. Grooming them, training them, finding the best studs to use for upcoming litters, finding the right families for new puppies and spending every weekend driving around the country, and occasionally across the border, to attend every dog show they could to produce Champion after Champion. Harry's father was an incredibly patient man who agreeably went along with his wife's demanding hobby.

Harry had grown up helping her mother, especially with grooming, which explained her current career choice.

“She is rather obsessed, it has to be said,” Tom said after a moment of thoughtful silence. “But she does produce rather lovely dogs.”

As if on cue, behind the door in the back leading to their home, their own two Pomeranians started barking. Both were cast-offs from Harry’s mother. Beelzebub, nicknamed Bub, had been born with one deformed ear that was much too small, and Lucifer, nicknamed Lucy, had been born with a cleft palate. Harry’s mother had wanted to put the poor puppy down, but Harry had adopted it instead so she could give it around the clock care when it came to feeding the first few weeks. Nowadays Lucy was feisty and active and affectionate, just like a Pom should be.

A loud bark echoed through their home which immediately shut the little terrors up. It seemed Lina, their English Mastiff, had enough of all the unnecessary noise. Lina was huge, even bigger than the St Bernhard Harry was now towelling dry, but she was an absolute sweetheart and quite lazy most of the time.

“Sure, my mother’s dogs are great,” Harry said as she helped the St Bernhard out of the tub so she could start blow drying him. It was going to take a while to get that dog dry. “But as a child, I couldn’t help but feel rather neglected at times.” Harry looked up to give Tom a reassuring smile. “I don’t care about it now that I have my memories back, but as a kid it often felt like she cared more about her dogs than about me and my sister.”

Tom expertly moved her scissors around the Shih Tzu’s face to give it some shape. “I have a theory about why your mother is that way.”

“Really?” Harry stared at Tom in surprise. “What’s the theory?”

Releasing a deep sigh, Tom placed her scissors down and leaned both hands on the edge of the grooming table. “I think it’s your mother’s way of coping with her family’s past.”

“Ah.” Harry gave a few understanding nods while focussing her gaze on the St Bernhard she was trying to coax on top of the grooming table. She had lowered the table as far as she could, but Ruben still seemed hesitant to step onto it. “I suppose that would make sense.”

Tom seemed to understand that Harry didn’t want to talk about it any further and went back to grooming the Shih Tzu.

Though it wasn’t that Harry didn’t want to talk about it, not really. It was just that it was a really painful subject to even consider.

Harry’s grandfather in their current life had been a Nazi. Had willingly joined up with them, had believed all the horrible shit they’d spread, and had partaken in some of the horrors of World War Two. After the war he’d even spent three years in prison for his war crimes.

And no one in the family had ever spoken about it. All throughout her childhood, all Harry had known was that her grandfather and grandmother were lovely, caring people who genuinely loved their family. Her grandmother was a fantastic cook, who treated her family to homemade Gröstl and Speckknödel and Kasspatzln, all hearty dishes that filled you right up served with endless amounts of love. And her grandfather had often taken Harry and her

sister and cousins on long walks through Innsbruck and the surrounding mountains, telling them about the city's long history and teaching them about the natural world around them.

He'd always very carefully ignored his own horrific past, had never mentioned it.

In fact, the whole family was so good at pretending that granddad had never been a Nazi at all that Harry hadn't even learned about it until after she met Tom and got her memories back. Then again, most of Austria seemed very good at pretending that their Nazi past had never happened. Even Tom's parents and grandparents, who'd never actively supported the Nazi party and had just tried to survive the war like everyone else, never really mentioned it.

And Harry readily went along with that kind of passive denial. Though she wasn't sure why. Harry spent an hour blow drying Ruben and considering the issue and not coming to any conclusions.

Tom transferred the Shih Tzu to one of the crates to wait for the owner to come pick it up and started on cleaning up her own workstation. Harry still had a good half hour of brushing to do before she could tackle the blizzard of fur around her. Thankfully, Tom came over to start on swiping up all the fur while Harry finished up the St Bernhard.

Both owners were on time to collect their dogs, which meant that Harry and Tom were done with their workday right on schedule and could take their own dogs for a much needed walk. Bub and Lucy jumped up and down around Harry and Tom's legs the moment they entered their home. Even Lina, lazy thing that she was, came sauntering over for a few quick pets.

In previous lives, Harry had mostly owned big dogs, so when she showed up with two Pomeranians in tow to spend the day with Tom after they first met, Tom had laughed in Harry's face. Harry had kicked Tom in her shin and assured her that her next dog would be a more powerful breed, something that would scare off any potential burglars for when they inevitably moved in together in a house of their own.

Tom had merely nodded and smiled and not mentioned it again until they found their dream home with room for a grooming salon and then Tom had surprised Harry with an English Mastiff puppy. Lina at 8 weeks was already bigger than Bub and Lucy combined. Bub and Lucy were a bit apprehensive about this new canine family member at first but eventually warmed up to her. Lucy even took to mothering Lina quite a bit, which was rather hilarious since Lina quickly grew to an enormous size. She was easily the biggest dog they'd ever owned and probably also one of the sweetest. Bub had quickly realized that no other dog dared to put him in his place as long as he had Lina at his back, even if Lina wouldn't hurt a fly. But her sheer size intimidated other dogs enough that they happily ignored a yapping little Pomeranian with a bit of an attitude problem.

Innsbruck was a small city that was surrounded by the snow capped mountains of Tirol. It was a stunning city many, many centuries old, with the kind of medieval architecture that was impossible not to love. Since Harry and Tom lived on the outskirts, they had a bit of nature nearby to walk their dogs. There was a small stretch of woods that ran all the way to the foot of the mountains which was perfect for an hour walk with your dogs. Many local people could be found there early in the morning or late in the afternoon and Harry and Tom had made friends with quite a few neighbours this way.

It was also a great way to find new customers, especially when they first opened their business. Dog owners were always eager to talk about their dogs and it was rather easy to let slip that they ran a new grooming salon nearby.

Once they crossed the small street and walked into the woods, Harry and Tom unleashed their dogs so they could go and sniff around as much as they wanted. It was late summer and the weather was warm, even if the leaves were already starting to change colour. They greeted some of the people they passed as they walked their usual route.

When they were alone again, Tom asked, "Why do you find it so difficult to talk about your family's past?"

Harry looked at Tom with wide eyes, surprised Tom would tackle such a subject so directly. Tom, no matter what body she was born into, was always a Slytherin at heart and usually preferred to gently steer people into the right direction through careful manipulations. Harry was the consummate Gryffindor who forever blundered her way forwards following the most direct path.

"Darling," Tom whispered, leaning a little closer when Harry couldn't think of anything to say. "You're shacking up with a Dark Lord, your former arch-nemesis, and you have no problems reminding me of my past. So what is giving you so much trouble?"

Harry inhaled a deep breath, swinging the dog leashes in her hand back and forth a few times as a few small pinecones crunched beneath her feet. "I'm not entirely sure."

Tom gave her a disbelieving look. "Come on. We've lived difficult lives before, with difficult issues that influenced us more directly than a Nazi grandparent."

Nodding, Harry sighed, well remembering some of the challenges they'd faced already. That time Tom had been a soldier under Stalin's merciless regime and had tried to help Harry and her family escape. That had ended in an impromptu execution on the side of the road. Everything about that life had been a shitshow, all things considered.

And yet that was easier to contemplate than her current grandfather's shady past. "He's such a lovely man," Harry said quietly, eyes on the trees in front of them. "Really, one of the better grandparents I've ever had. And he's done such horrible things." Tom looked like she wanted to comment, but Harry didn't let her. "What if we're reborn as Nazis? Or something worse?" Harry blinked, briefly pursing her lips. Was there even something worse than Nazis? The roving gangs of thieves and murderers they'd had to fight in their previous life seemed up there with Nazis at least.

"Ah." Tom's smile seemed both knowing and a bit bitter. "You're worried we'll be reborn as something that doesn't match your morals, is that it?"

Harry shrugged and then snapped, "Bub, leave that!" The little terror had found some horse manure on the trail and looked like he was about to have a tasty bite of it.

"Because I can guarantee you that we'll eventually be reborn as something entirely distasteful." Tom grinned at Harry, making it almost look like a challenge. "I have no real

idea why we keep getting reincarnated, but I think it is safe to say that the process is rather random.”

“Yeah,” Harry whispered as she nodded a few times. There really was no rhyme or reason to the lives they’d lived so far. They really seemed absolutely random.

“So it stands to reason that some life in the future we’ll be reborn as Nazis. Or slave owners. Or colonizers ready to wipe out any local populations.” When Harry stared at Tom in absolute horror, Tom added with a rather knowing look, “The possibilities are endless, Harry. Humans have acted like monsters all throughout history. And they’ll keep acting like monsters well into the future. And we’ll be living some of their lives eventually.”

“I don’t want that,” Harry muttered, her innate stubbornness making itself known once again. It was one of those traits that seemed to follow Harry from life to life no matter what. Impulsiveness was another trait that Harry could never seem to get rid of.

“I don’t think that whatever mechanism that is driving our rebirths is going to give you much of a choice, darling.” Tom gave Harry a look that was full of amusement, though Harry knew Tom only meant to tease her. Tom’s smile became sympathetic. “We’ll make the best of whatever life we’ll find ourselves in, like we always do.”

Harry wasn’t sure how she’d ever be able to make the best of a life in which she was expected to actively commit genocide. Every instinct in Harry’s body screamed in protest at that mere suggestion. She knew Tom was right on a practical level, but emotionally Harry wasn’t nearly ready yet to make such decisions.

“It’s just...” Harry briefly bit her bottom lip, at a loss for words to express the sharp bouts of grief that shot through her chest. “He’s such a lovely man, my grandfather. And he did such horrible things while truly believing that certain humans were no better than animals. Less than animals even.” Harry gave Tom a helpless look, eyes wide and lips trembling. “I really don’t know how to handle this in my head.”

Tom stopped walking and wrapped her arm around Harry’s shoulders, pulling her into a half-hug. Lina stopped walking at once, giving them a curious look to see if everything was all right. Bub and Lucy were far too busy sniffing squirrel tracks to notice the mood had changed. “You know the world isn’t black and white. And neither are people.” Tom lowered her head while she ran her hand across Harry’s long, blond hair. “Remember life number 9? You loved murderers then, too.”

That had been the life they’d been Samurai in feudal Japan. Tom was right, though. They’d lived in different villages then, still eager to ignore each other’s existence. But both of them had lived amongst family and friends who happily went out to cut down any enemy that tried to take over their villages. “But we were defending our villages then,” Harry argued while staring at Tom with a frown.

“Were we?” Tom raised her eyebrows in a clear challenge. “Or were we doing the bidding of the shogun, who in turn followed orders from the emperor. We were soldiers ordered to kill whoever they declared as an enemy.”

“It’s still different,” Harry muttered, glancing down. “At least we weren’t fucking Nazis.”

Tom shrugged, more red curls escaping from her ponytail. “A monster is still a monster by any other name. It’s all semantics in the end.”

Huffing, Harry stepped out from under Tom’s arm and gave her a good, long glare. “I can’t believe you’re being so callous about this, about some of the horrible lives that await us.”

Shaking her head, Tom gave Harry an urgent look. “I’m not worried about those lives, darling, because *we* will be living them. In the end it doesn’t matter what sort of life you’re born into. What matters is what you do with it.” When Harry still seemed somewhat unconvinced, Tom said, “Say we’re reborn as Nazis our next life. Would you just go along with that? Follow orders and exterminate Jews and gays and the disabled?”

“Of course not!” Harry snapped, finding it hard to believe Tom would even suggest such a thing. “I’d do whatever I could to sabotage their whole miserable operation.”

Tom spread her arms wide while giving Harry a satisfied smile. “Exactly. And that is why I’m not worried. Because in the end it doesn’t matter what you are. It’s what you do that matters the most.”

Harry frowned, letting Tom’s words sink in. Her soulmate, because that is what Tom was to her after so many shared rebirths, had somewhat of a point. “Yeah, okay. We’d still do the right thing. Still not looking forward to those kind of lives, though.”

“Our last life we lived in a world destroyed by bombs and radiation and we managed to find moments of happiness, didn’t we?” Tom resumed walking and Harry quickly caught up with her. “It was hard work, I’m not denying that, but we also had our small victories.”

Harry couldn’t hold back a smile. Yeah, their last life had been something else, all right. Mostly it was surviving a harsh world without much time for frivolities. But even then there had been good times, however small they were. When they managed to harvest crops again, no matter if it wasn’t a bountiful harvest just yet. Whenever they found new stocks of non-perishable foods. Harry remembered that one time they’d come across a supermarket distribution centre that had remained entirely untouched, which was nothing short of a miracle. That bounty had fed their small community for well over a year right as they’d been on the brink of starvation.

Tom returned Harry’s smile with one of her own, probably remembering the same moment. The party they’d thrown in celebration had truly been unforgettable.

Bub started barking as he spotted one of his rivals up ahead. A neighbour with two dachshunds came walking towards them and Bub immediately tried to get into a pissing match with them both. Thankfully, the dachshunds ignored the yappy terror and trotted on while Harry and Tom greeted Frau Steiner.

Perhaps Tom was right and Harry was being worried for no good reason. “I think perhaps it’s more than all that,” Harry mused, not even sure where she was going with her thoughts. “I

think perhaps in the end I'm just afraid to lose all the good lives we get to live together. Like this one."

"I agree, it's difficult to lose our lives time and again," Tom said in a quiet voice full of understanding. "But we get new lives in return. Some will be difficult lives, without question, but eventually we'll get even better lives than we've had before."

Harry blinked and considered Tom's words. "Probably, yeah. I mean, we must eventually hit on a life where we're filthy rich."

Tom frowned and gave Harry a disbelieving look. "You were filthy rich in life number six, darling. As was I with my supermodel career and cosmetics empire."

"Oh yeah," Harry said, now remembering her forays into rockstar stardom. "I'd almost forgotten that."

"Too busy getting high back then, instead of thoughtfully enjoying your wealth," Tom said with a clearly disapproving tone. "But your example is a rather poignant one for a different reason. You had the literal life of a wealthy rockstar, and you've almost forgotten it already."

"Huh." Harry slowed her pace for a moment as she had a bit of an epiphany. "Okay, I think I get what you're saying. We should enjoy what we have when we have it, because in the end we'll lose it all anyway."

"And we'll start all over again, yes." Tom's brown eyes were full of warmth when Harry gazed into them.

"Together," Harry whispered, because no matter what lives they led, that was the most important thing of all.

Life # 21: That time Harry and Tom were Holmes and Watson

Chapter Notes

This is a crossover with BBC Sherlock. You don't need to be too familiar with it to enjoy this chapter. I wanted to write a life from Tom's pov where he's confronted with certain aspects of his past and this world fit the bill.

Thank you all for your patience and for your support. I hope you'll enjoy this one. Let me know what you think! Reading your comments helps to get me motivated to write more.

Life # 21: That time Harry and Tom were Holmes and Watson

Tom got his memories back the usual way. He met Harry while his friend Mike introduced them at St Bart's.

Of course, what was different this time around was that Harry introduced himself as *Sherlock Holmes* with a tiny yet insufferable smile. And then he promptly showed off by metaphorically undressing Tom where he stood as he summed up detail after detail about Tom's life that he couldn't possibly know.

Tom slowly closed his eyes. Harry was Sherlock Holmes and Tom was John Watson. Or some modern version of them, at any rate.

How did these lives even get chosen? Who decided what sort of people they were going to be life after life? The previous life they'd been a couple of dog groomers, for fuck's sake, living a peaceful life in Austria until they died of natural causes while they were well into their eighties.

And now they apparently were the world's most famous detective along with his faithful sidekick.

Before he could stop it, a sharp pang of envy coursed through Tom's body, leaving a sour trail in its wake.

Tom should have been Sherlock Holmes. Not Harry the bumbling Gryffindor. Tom was the consummate Slytherin. Tom was always the clever one, no matter what sort of life they led. That's not to say that Tom as John Watson was stupid. Not at all. Tom in his current incarnation was plenty smart. He was a medical doctor, after all. But he wasn't *Sherlock Holmes* levels of smart and that stung, no matter that Tom didn't want to ever feel envious of his soulmate.

Harry announced that Tom could be his roommate and told him to come to 221b Baker Street before giving him a cheeky wink. And then he was gone and Tom was left staring into space

in complete shock.

“Yeah,” Mike said with a knowing smile. “He’s always like that.”

Something told Tom he’d be spending most of his time this life trying to save Harry from himself. No matter what kind of life Harry led, he was always the impulsive one. Combine that with a newly acquired genius level intellect and an unstoppable need to solve every interesting crime that came his way and it didn’t take the world’s most famous detective to deduct that Harry was going to get himself killed sooner rather than later.

Oh fuck. If there existed a Sherlock Holmes and a John Watson in this world, there also had to be a James Moriarty. Sherlock Holmes’ arch-nemesis and reportedly at least equally as intelligent. And in every single fictional story starring Sherlock Holmes that Tom had ever read, Moriarty always, *always* wanted to destroy Sherlock Holmes.

Yeah, this version of Moriarty was going to be in for a bit of a surprise, because this Sherlock Holmes had a former Dark Lord on his side, determined to keep him safe. Tom squared his shoulders and said a quick goodbye to Mike. There was no time to waste. Harry could be landing himself in a world of trouble right at that moment without Tom to keep him safe.

Tom had been a genius once upon a life. Granted, he’d used that genius intellect to turn himself into a magical mass-murderer while valiantly trying to rule the entire world, consequences be damned. But that experience might serve him well enough to predict what a criminal mastermind like Moriarty might plan to see Harry end up in an early grave.

Mrs Hudson turned out to be their landlady, not their housekeeper, as she pointed out numerous times. The flat was spacious enough, especially for London standards, but it was completely covered by Harry’s clutter.

Tom released a quiet sigh. Harry was never the most organized person in the world, but he was usually very clean. Being forced to do household chores from an early age on by those ridiculous muggle relatives in their first life had instilled a sense of cleanliness in Harry that usually carried over into every new life. Though apparently not this time.

Harry noticed Tom’s disapproving frown and quickly made the world’s worst attempt at organizing the mess on the table before giving up entirely. Tom could practically see Harry’s mind moving at lightspeed as he pondered the latest criminal case that had caught his attention.

“Would you be wanting one bedroom or two?” Mrs Hudson asked with a suggestive little smile.

“I’ve only just met him,” Tom pointed out, giving Mrs Hudson a bit of a disbelieving look. Yes, he and Harry usually ended up in a relationship if the circumstances around them allowed it, but he still wanted to put up at least the illusion that their future relationship happened naturally.

“Don’t worry, Mrs Hudson,” Harry said, lips curled up in a smirk while he winked at Tom. “I have every intention to woo John until he capitulates.”

“And how were you planning to do that?” Tom asked, raising his eyebrows in a clear challenge.

Harry moved closer to the window, glancing down towards the street for a moment. “By taking you on a date you won’t soon forget, of course.”

At that point they were interrupted by the police. One of them was called Lestrade, because of course he was. Lestrade asked Harry to come look at a crime scene. And Harry then asked Tom to come along.

And thus Tom spent his first date with Harry looking at a corpse of some unfortunate woman who’d been forced to commit suicide. Harry had been right in that regard, Tom had to admit. This was a date he’d not soon forget.

Tom held back and observed Harry as he showed off his deductive skills. Interestingly, only Lestrade seemed somewhat friendly towards Harry. All the other officers there made it very clear they’d rather not see Harry involved at all, no matter that his amazing intellect could most likely help them crack the case a lot quicker.

One particularly vitriolic officer called Harry a freak and predicted he’d start murdering people next as a form of entertainment. Tom barely responded to those ridiculous accusations. He’d been a murderer, someone who genuinely enjoyed seeing the light leave people’s eyes. He knew all too well that Harry wasn’t like that. Harry could kill, make no mistake. But Harry didn’t find enjoyment in it, as Tom had done once upon a time.

No, Tom understood that Harry’s behaviour was the direct consequence of having the kind of genius intellect that was rarely seen. A brain like that needed stimulation, and only the most difficult problems could provide enough substance to keep a brain like that satisfied. Once upon a life, Tom had used difficult magic to keep his genius brain entertained. He’d adjusted and invented magic in ways that had never been done before. But they were muggles now and thus Harry had to find some other way to keep his mind occupied. Solving difficult crimes seemed like a perfectly harmless occupation, all things considered.

Harry took off to parts unknown, following some new clue he’d just uncovered, leaving Tom to get kidnapped at gunpoint.

For a few long, terrifying moments, Tom was certain he’d been taken by Moriarty. But it soon became apparent that his kidnapper genuinely cared for Sherlock Holmes, even if he had a very strange way of showing it.

So this had to be Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s older brother. Tom politely turned down his offer to spy on his little brother and then he was allowed to leave again. After Mycroft made a very astute observation about the reasons for Tom’s difficulties reintegrating into civilian life.

The first thing Tom did was collect his gun. He wasn’t going to be caught off guard like that again if he could help it. The next thing he planned to do was to sit Harry down and have a very serious conversation about their future together. Tom wanted their lives to be long

enough that they could peacefully die of old age, but so far Harry wasn't putting in much effort to achieve that.

The police turning their flat upside down put a stopper in that conversation. Harry prowled their living room like a caged tiger, eager to get on with the hunt while being held back by those inconvenient bars. And then Harry left *with the actual serial killer*, leaving Tom to chase after him so he could shoot the bastard just in the nick of time.

Yeah, Tom had unfortunately been right in his prediction about this life together.

"Don't you ever run off like that again," Tom seethed as they stepped inside their flat. They finally found themselves alone for the first time since they met.

"What?" Harry gave Tom a puzzled look. "What does it matter? I had the chance to draw out the killer and I did."

"You almost got yourself killed!" Tom squeezed his hands into fists as he glared up at Harry. He hated being the shorter one, especially when he was angry. It was just a lot easier to convey your disapproval when you could loom over someone.

"You made it in time, didn't you?" Harry gave a careless shrug, proving that he cared nothing for his own safety.

Why was Tom stuck reincarnating into life after life with the world's most impulsive Gryffindor? What had Tom ever done to deserve this? Even being a Dark Lord who'd murdered hundreds couldn't be that bad of a crime to be punished in this way for all eternity.

"Were you going to make tea?" Harry asked as he flopped down in what was to become his chair, throwing his coat carelessly across the nearby table. "I could do with a cuppa."

Tom inhaled several deep breaths before he decided that perhaps their current conversation was better had with some tea to soothe their nerves. Well, Tom's nerves, at least. Harry didn't seem bothered by much of anything at that moment.

"I can't believe we're actually fictional characters in this life," Harry mused as he lay sprawled in his chair, head leaning on the backrest as he stared at nothing on the ceiling. "This might just be the most interesting life we've lived yet."

"We've been fictional characters before," Tom said quietly as he placed the kettle on the stove. They needed to get an electrical one, he decided. They needed to get plenty of kitchen necessities, by the looks of it.

"What?" Harry raised his head a bit so he could look at Tom with a frown. "Who?"

"Our first lives," Tom said with barely a sideways glance as he rummaged through the cupboards in search of cups and teabags. "We might not have known it at that time, but we now know Harry Potter and Tom Riddle are in fact fictional characters in some worlds."

"Ah, yes." Harry scrunched his face up in some form of mild disappointment. "I suppose that counts, though being Sherlock Holmes does feel like much more of an epic event."

“Because you’re aware of it now,” Tom offered as he placed bags of Earl Grey into a couple of mostly clean mugs he’d discovered. They definitely needed proper teacups. They were British this life and what Brit didn’t have a real tea set in their home? “Being a fictional boy wizard destined to save the entire Wizarding World from an evil Dark Lord seems equally as epic when you think about it.” Tom managed to keep his tone even as he carried the steaming mugs into the sitting room, though part of him felt strangely hurt that Harry would prefer being Sherlock Holmes over Harry Potter, Tom’s once arch-nemesis.

It was kind of funny, but twenty lives on and Tom still sometimes had trouble understanding his own emotions. Their second life, after Tom had recovered from the shock of finding himself reborn into the body of some meaningless muggle, he’d made it his mission to understand emotions and human behaviour. He’d gotten a PhD in Psychology and he’d spent decades teaching it at the University of Edinburgh. And yet here he was, with twenty lifetimes under his belt, and he still wasn’t sure why he kept feeling envious and rejected at the strangest of times while he got to know this brand-new version of his soulmate.

“How did you do it?” Harry asked quietly, blowing over the rim of his steaming mug.

Tom lowered himself down into his chair and gave Harry a puzzled look. “Do what?”

“In our first life, you had an intellect that matched or perhaps rivalled my current intelligence,” Harry said, eyes sharp as he gazed at Tom. “How did you keep from going bonkers trying to keep your brain entertained?”

“Dark Magic,” Tom said with a bit of a chuckle. “And eventually I ripped my soul apart and drove myself completely insane and then I stopped caring about pretty much everything, including keeping my mind occupied with meaningful things.”

Harry remained quiet for a moment. “A pity we’re muggles this time, or I could have delved into some Dark Magic this life.” When Tom gave him an incredulous look, Harry added, “I’m quite sure I’m a high-functioning sociopath in this body.” All of that was said with a completely blank face, as though Harry was sharing the weather report instead of diagnosing himself with a lack of most human emotions and an ability to feel empathy.

“Were you ever formally diagnosed?” Tom asked while his heart hammered in his chest.

Harry shrugged. “My parents sent me to some poor psychologist when I was six but all I did was make her cry time after time so eventually they stopped. I am, however, clever enough to know my own limitations.”

“I’m sure you are.” Tom offered Harry a pleasant little smile and then occupied himself with sipping his tea. So Harry might be more intelligent than Tom Riddle ever was while he lacked any capacity for empathy. Wasn’t that a recipe for disaster. In their first life, Tom hadn’t been born a sociopath, no matter what some might think. Tom had turned himself into one by ripping his soul apart eventually, but as a child he’d felt every emotion a human being could feel. He’d just had a terribly abusive childhood in that dreaded orphanage so he quickly learned to mask and suppress everything he felt. And at Hogwarts his insatiable mind had urged him on and on in his quest to learn every single aspect of magic. Yet Tom had still been full of emotions in those early years, until he smashed his soul into smithereens. He’d

become a downright lunatic after that. Full of paranoia and illusions of grandeur while he was no longer able to understand the real consequences of any of his absurd plans.

Tom had spent much of his second life buried under mountains of embarrassment that he'd turned a promising life as a clever wizard into such an unmitigated disaster that had cost so many people their lives.

And now here Harry sat, claiming to be something that had plagued Tom once upon a time and which had led to the ruin of hundreds of people in their first life.

Yeah, Tom really did have his work cut out for him this life, didn't he?

"I'm going to bed," Harry said after he drained his mug. "I suspect my brain has been sufficiently worn out that I might be able to sleep for most of the night." And with that he got up, passed through the kitchen and disappeared into what Tom assumed was a bedroom in the back of their flat.

Well. That was unexpected.

It wasn't that Tom expected a round of mind-blowing sex immediately, especially after the tumultuous day they'd just had. But he had expected to at least share a bed with Harry, since there was nothing stopping them in this life. Two men shacking up and sleeping together was nothing out of the ordinary in the times they now lived in. But apparently Harry needed some space or something and Tom was happy enough to give it to him. So he finished his own tea and went in search of the spare bedroom upstairs. He stripped down to his underwear, placed his gun on the nightstand and thankfully fell asleep within minutes, worn out from all the adventures he'd managed to have in less than twelve hours.

Over the next few days, as Tom moved all his personal belongings over to their flat, he got used to living with this version of Harry. And this version of his soulmate definitely was different than what he was used to.

Harry was usually a very expressive person who wore his emotions on his sleeve. He was also quite a tactile person, who enjoyed physical contact with his loved ones.

This Harry was none of those things. He was aloof, distant and obsessed with finding new criminal cases to solve. He also displayed a casual disregard of anyone's feelings, even those of the victims in the cases they investigated. It was an adjustment, to say the least, and more than once Tom longed for their previous life when they'd been two women sharing a long, happy and quiet life together.

"Did you move into the upstairs bedroom?" Harry asked on the third day after Tom officially moved in, as though it only now occurred to him that his soulmate wasn't sharing his bed.

Tom gave him a measured look as he stood stirring some scrambled eggs in a skillet. "Well, I had to sleep somewhere and I didn't want to presume I'd be sharing your bed."

Harry got an expression on his face that could only be described as complicated. "Ah. Of course you're welcome in my bed, Tom. But you should be aware that I'm not at all

interested in sex.”

That was a bit of a surprise. In their previous lives, whenever they ended up in a relationship together, they’d always had fantastic sex lives. Tom had come to genuinely love being intimate with Harry, far beyond enjoying a few shared orgasms. Bringing Harry to new heights of pleasure was tremendously satisfying for Tom as well, as it turned out.

“You’re asexual?” Tom guessed as he filled two plates with eggs and carried them to the kitchen table. This was a new thing for them. They’d known asexual people before, but they’d never been asexual themselves so far.

“I suppose,” Harry said with a shrug, his mind already on other, far more interesting things as he started spooning eggs into his mouth on autopilot. Apparently that was the end of the subject for now.

That evening, Tom followed Harry into his bedroom. It was just as cluttered as the rest of the flat had been before Tom moved in, but the bed was big and comfortable so Tom didn’t have too much to complain about.

“Goodnight,” Harry said as he turned off the light before burrowing under the covers.

“Night,” Tom whispered, rolling over onto his side and trying to get comfortable.

“You could sleep with other people if you wanted,” Harry said out of the blue. There was no emotion in his voice that Tom could hear. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t want to,” Tom said at once because he didn’t. Yes, he’d had relationships with other people in the past, even after he and Harry developed positive feelings for each other around life number ten. It was to be expected if you lived in societies where a relationship between them might not be accepted for whatever reason. Some of those relationships with others had even been genuinely happy ones. But Tom refused to fuck around when he was in a relationship with Harry.

“Very well.” This time, Harry had just a trace of satisfaction in his voice, Tom was sure.

Over the next few weeks, Harry found a few more cases that piqued his interest while Tom decided to start a blog to write down their adventures. His therapist insisted he find a way to express himself and Tom knew that at least the fictional versions of John Watson always wrote down the deeds of Sherlock Holmes. He might as well continue that tradition. Besides, it helped to bring in new clients, which in turn helped them to earn a living. It soon became clear that Harry was entirely disorganized when it came to personal finances, so Tom took care of that for them as well.

While they were making money, slowly but surely, from Harry’s consulting detective business, Tom still got a parttime job as a local physician. Just to make sure they had an income to pay their bills should they not get enough cases to solve. And, if Tom was honest with himself, to get away from Harry for a few days each week.

Harry as a high-functioning sociopath was exhausting. It didn't take Tom very long to suspect Harry had either ADD or ADHD as well, given Harry's absolute inability to deal with boredom and the way he managed to plunge his surroundings into absolute chaos without even trying. A week after they'd dealt with an interesting case involving codebreaking and Chinese acrobatic performers, Tom decided to carefully touch on that subject as they were having tea in the living room.

"I suspect your brain could do with a bit of extra dopamine," Tom said and sipped his cup. A proper teacup that Tom had purchased a few weeks before.

Harry gave him a look full of quiet contempt. "What on earth are you talking about?"

Sighing, Tom shook his head and lowered his teacup. "You must have noticed you display a lot of the symptoms of ADHD."

Snorting, Harry rolled his eyes. "Don't be absurd. I simply have a genius intellect and need constant stimulation to keep my mind occupied."

"And you sink into a depression when that's not the case. You also are even more impulsive than usual." Tom would have said more but Harry interrupted him by jumping up from his chair so he could properly loom over Tom.

"Listen," Harry said, teeth gritted. "My brain is doing fine without any pills you think I should take. In fact, I don't think I've ever functioned better mentally than I do right now."

Tom very seriously doubted that and those thoughts must have shown on his face even though he kept his mouth shut.

"Oh come on," Harry said, crossing his arms while he glared down at Tom. "You of all people must understand how emotions hold people back. To be free of them, to only use your intellect without being weighed down by *feelings* is the highest tier a human being could possibly ever reach."

Tom wasn't sure if he should laugh hysterically or jump up and punch Harry in the face. He really wanted to do both, to be honest. "Are you truly suggesting, dearest, that Voldemort was a better version of a human being than I am today?"

Harry carelessly waved a hand around. "Not the murdering, of course. But you were a sight smarter in your first life than you've been in any other life so far and yes, that made that version of you superior in most ways."

Something sharp yet invisible pierced Tom's chest, striking his heart. He narrowed his eyes and his voice was barely audible as he spoke next. "Voldemort was a paranoid lunatic who loved nothing more than murdering innocent people and you of all people should remember that."

"I remember that just fine," Harry said with a bit of a sneer, as though Tom's opinion couldn't possibly mean much in the grand scheme of things. "And it hardly matters anymore, since you have redeemed yourself many times over."

Tom's anger quickly made way for confusion and he stared up at Harry with a frown. "Redeem myself? How on earth have I redeemed myself?"

"My god, are you really this stupid?" Harry said in a tone that suggested he wasn't trying to be insulting but that he genuinely questioned Tom's intelligence. "After our first life you've been a decent human being, haven't you? At least you've stayed away from Dark Lording and murdering the innocent."

"That's not redemption," Tom said with a disbelieving look, wondering if Harry was really, genuinely missing the obvious here. "That's simply rebirth. I never redeemed myself as Voldemort. I never had time for that in my first life. And me leading a normal life the second time around doesn't count as redemption whatsoever."

"You know, Mycroft likes to compare the average person to a goldfish," Harry said with something in his eyes that came very close to pity. "And I'm forced to conclude that he's right, which I hate to do. I really am surrounded by goldfish in this life." And with that, Harry picked up his coat from where he'd thrown it on the sofa earlier and swept out the door.

Tom stared at the wall while the remainder of his tea slowly grew cold. As a rule, Tom didn't believe in higher powers such as some omniscient God who sat on a cloud all day, watching people masturbate and judging them for it. Even now that he was stuck in an endless cycle of rebirth, Tom was convinced it wasn't caused by some deity but was instead some fluke of magic. Tom had turned Harry into an accidental horcrux, linking their souls together forever, and Harry had accidentally become the Master of Death. And that was that.

And yet, right at that moment, as the afternoon turned to evening and Tom soon found himself surrounded by darkness, Tom couldn't help but wonder if this life was some sort of belated punishment for his first life.

Because Harry the genius sociopath was eerily similar to how Tom had been once upon a time. Seeing Harry like this was almost like looking in a distorted mirror and Tom hated seeing this wretched reflection of how he used to be. Tom had spent lives and lives working his arse off to never, ever let himself fall as hard and as fast into darkness as he'd done in his first life.

And here Harry was, taunting Tom with what he'd once been every single moment they spent together.

The worst part, though, was that Harry himself didn't deserve this. The Harry that Tom had come to know and love would be horrified to see himself like this, comparing humans to goldfish and claiming that lacking feelings made you a superior lifeform.

Fuck. Tom missed that Harry. Missed his soulmate who always was a much better person than Tom could ever hope to be. Harry should be full of compassion and humour and a general enthusiasm for life and everything that came with it. Not this cold, calculating genius who only cared about solving difficult murder cases.

The door opened, announcing Harry's return with the smell of cigarette smoke.

“What are you doing in the dark?” Harry asked, throwing his coat over the sofa and flicking on a lamp on the side table.

“Thinking,” Tom whispered, only now realizing he was still holding a cold cup of tea. He placed it on the small table beside his chair as he blinked up at Harry. “Reminiscing.”

Sighing, Harry sank down in his own chair. “I know I’m different,” he said and swallowed audibly. “I notice it, too. I know I should *feel* certain things. I almost know what they should actually feel like. But I just don’t. And honesty, I don’t really care right now that I don’t.”

With a sad little smile Tom got up from his chair, his legs just stiff enough that they hurt to move. “I know you don’t right now. But you will, Harry. Next life, you will.”

Shrugging, Harry leaned back in his chair. “You’re still the most important person to me in the entire world, Tom. I know you are. I might not feel all of it, but I know what you mean to me.”

“I love you, too,” Tom whispered and headed into the kitchen. “How about we order out for dinner? I can’t be bothered to cook.” The kitchen was still dark and Tom was grateful for that because he needed a moment to blink away some moisture from his eyes before he could face Harry again.

“Curry would be nice,” Harry said distractedly, glancing at Tom’s laptop on the dining table. “Did you get anymore comments on your latest blog? Any new cases?”

“Not that I know of.” Tom got out the flyer to their favourite Indian restaurant a few streets away. “But I’m sure something will pop up sooner or later.”

Famous last words because before long Harry and Tom were running around London trying to save people who were being strapped in bomb vests and were used to communicate clues to them. Harry pulled it off, proving yet again that he truly was a genius detective. He solved every single case while Tom tried to help as much as he could. Which didn’t turn out to be all that helpful when he got taken by James Moriarty himself.

They all ended up in a swimming pool of all places where Moriarty finally revealed himself. He turned out to be an Irish bloke and Tom got some strange sense of satisfaction when he noticed that Moriarty wasn’t much taller than him. That unexpected mental windfall was quickly drowned out by the sheer terror of being strapped in a bomb vest while Harry all but flirted with Moriarty by way of death threats.

The moment Moriarty disappeared, though, Harry’s whole demeanour changed in an instant. Gone was the cocky expression, replaced with one of sheer terror as he helped to yank the bomb vest off Tom as quickly as he could.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked, looking Tom over three times in a row.

While Tom’s legs refused to function for a few moments and he had to lean against the wall to stay upright, Tom couldn’t hold back a smile. This was the most expressive Harry had yet been with his feelings, proving that he wasn’t entirely without them after all. “I’m okay. I’m

good.” To be honest, Tom was better than good. Getting actual confirmation that Harry *cared* was more than he’d expected at this point and the adrenaline in his system was quickly replaced with a rush of warm affection.

Of course, then Moriarty had to come back and almost ruin everything. While Harry and Moriarty bickered some more, Tom wondered if Moriarty had simply taken the wrong exit and had to come up with an excuse to enter the pool hall again without losing face. No matter, they made it out alive even if the bad guy got away. For now.

That night as they lay in bed, Tom scooted closer to Harry and gently wrapped his arm around Harry’s waist, spooning him from behind. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah,” Harry whispered into the darkness. “This is fine.” He placed his own hand on top of Tom’s, holding onto it for most of the night, even after he fell asleep.

Something changed between them from that moment onwards. Some enormous weight had fallen off Tom’s shoulders, allowing him to move easier through this life. Harry, too, seemed a bit more expressive, smiled a bit more at Tom. It gave Tom genuine hope that they’d be all right together, no matter how different they were this time around.

The doorbell rang right as they finished breakfast.

“Oh,” Harry said, eyes gleaming as he glanced at Tom. “I hope it’s a murder.”

Sighing, Tom pushed his chair back and got up. Time to go to work.

Their next life, they met in a dance hall in Naples, Italy in 1963. Tom was a young man who’d just asked a pretty young woman to dance.

“Dio mio.” Harry stared up at Tom with wide, disbelieving eyes. “Dio mio, oh my god.”

“Come.” Tom gently grabbed Harry by the elbow and led her from the busy hall to a quiet corner near the toilets.

“What the fuck,” Harry muttered as she wrapped herself completely around Tom, holding onto him for dear life. “For the record, I don’t think you’re a goldfish, babe.” Before Tom could reply, Harry peppered his face with kisses, no doubt getting red lipstick marks everywhere. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Tom pulled back, staring down at his soulmate with a smile even though his eyes felt suspiciously wet. “Love you, too. I’ll always love you, Harry, remember that.”

“I know.” Harry’s eyes filled with tears and a few spilled over, running down her cheeks. “I knew I loved you, babe. I just... everything was so muted somehow, like my insides were hollowed out. Being that smart was amazing, don’t get me wrong, but not being able to properly love you wasn’t worth it.”

“And yet we still managed to live a good life.” Tom pressed a soft kiss to Harry’s wet cheek. “And this life, we’ll do even better.”

Harry nodded furiously and wrapped herself around Tom again. Tom returned the embrace, glad to have his soulmate back, emotions and all.

End Notes

Thanks for reading. Let me know what you think.

Come join me on Tumblr: [maeglinvedi](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!