

## "Run"

Run away, little girl. Run for your life.

Those words run through my brain, as they have for so very long. They're looking for me. They've been looking for me for a long time. I have no doubt they will keep looking for me until I am found. I am unfortunate in many ways; my foes are relentless, unforgiving and endlessly patient.

I am also cursed by being a witch. With good health, I can expect an almost fifteen decade life-span. I'm only 22. I've been running for 467 days. The prospect of another 46,511 days of running away scares the life out of me.

I can't blame them, though. I know why they pursue me. Under different circumstances, I would be one of the hunters, not the hunted. I have committed a crime that so boggles the mind, it cannot be forgiven. A crime so heinous, I should be put to death for it.

I ran. I ran away like a coward the instant it happened. I didn't explain why to anyone. What the hell would I be able to say? "Sorry"? Somehow, that just wouldn't cut it.

It's saddening to know that I will never be able to go home. I had such a nice life. A beautiful house, a good job and the powerful love of a great man. I was a hero of the Blood War, and my name was known to almost everyone.

Then I ruined it. I committed my vile act, and everything went to hell in a handbasket. I lost my life that day. Sadly, I'm still alive. Alive to suffer for my misdeed. My soul is damned for eternity for my crime, but I can't bring myself to end my life. I must suffer. Through a full, empty and painful life, and then for the rest of time. I deserve no less.

I've been in Argentina for the last six days. I've not been able to spend more than two weeks in any one place. My pursuers are so good, they can track me down, usually within ten days, regardless of how I hide. I've tried everything; glamour charms, false passports, Muggle transport, even leaving my wand in another country at one point. They still track me down.

Given who their leader is, it's not surprising. Harry James Potter, the 'Chosen One', the 'Boy-Who-Lived', managed to utterly destroy the most powerful Dark Lord in the last ten centuries. He effectively wiped out every Dark magic user in Europe within twelve months of his graduation from the Auror Academy. There isn't a prison in this hemisphere that doesn't have at least half of it's inmates because of him.

He is pursuing me. I cannot face him. His powers are so far above mine, it's not even funny. He is driven by a single-minded determination to find me. After what I did... I'm not surprised.

There is one good thing about my crime, if anything from the vile action could be considered good; the entire magical world, and I'm not referring to the parochial "Wizarding World" that Britain considers itself, but every magical community on Earth has joined forces. I've actually heard people say that my crime has generated a 'Golden Age of International Co-operation'. Every Ministry of Magic has signed a new treaty, granting Aurors authorisation to operate in their countries, provided that all parties are notified. Extradition treaties have become a thing of the past. The lessons of Voldemort and people running to other countries has been learned well.

Of course, this has bugged me up royally. There is nowhere I can run to without local law enforcement tracking me down, and calling in the International Task Force, led by Harry Potter himself. They'll capture me if they can, and take me back to Britain. I can't go back.

I managed to snare a rabbit a few hours ago, and it's been hung up ever since. I'll have to cook it manually, using matches and a cauldron. If I use my wand, they'll be on me in minutes. It's the height of stupidity to use magic now, but I can't leave it behind. If I do, I will be defenceless. I can't fight, but I can't take the chance of being wandless.

While the water's boiling for my rabbit stew, I take the chance to think, yet again, about what I did. As I said earlier, my crime is a heinous one. I killed the baby daughter of Harry James Potter. The guilt washes over me again, but I do nothing to fight it. I deserve the guilt. I deserve the pain. I deserve death.

God, I loathe rabbit. But I can't take the chance of being seen by anyone. I know that there are probably pictures of me in every airport, train station and apparition point on the planet. I backpack most of the time, only apparating when I'm in heavily populated places. It's much harder to track that way, especially if I reappear in another heavily populated place. Disappearing into the crowds has been my only refuge for so long.

I can feel something. I pull my wand, and take a second to glance out of the window. It's still relatively light outside, but there's nothing. Nothing visible, at least. But there's a strange sensation in the air. Oh, damn... it's an anti-apparition ward. They've found me. I have thirty seconds, at best, to make my escape. If the wards have gone up, there'll already be at least ten people surrounding this ramshackle house I've broken into. Huh... another crime to add to my impressively large sheet.

Without the possibility of apparition, I am limited to a physical escape, highly unlikely against Potter-trained Aurors, or a Portkey. I never bothered to get a Portkey-creation licence, but I know how. I try to avoid using them, since they can be tracked within minutes, but this time, I don't think I have an alternative.

I grab the knife I used to hack the poor rabbit to pieces, and tap it with my wand. I search my mind for the best place to go, concluding that Grand Central Station will be my best bet this time. Obliviators will have some overtime covering it up, but that's hardly a priority.

I grab my backpack, the only thing I've been able to keep with me, sling it on my shoulders, and activate the Portkey. I'm fortunate; they haven't had time to bring that ward up yet. As my vision fades, I see the door to the shack burst open, a pair of scarlet-clad Aurors entering with wands drawn. I recognise them, of course. How could I not? Neville Longbottom, Auror Lieutenant, is almost as recognisable as the man stood to his left, the man whose daughter I killed. They call out my name as the Portkey takes me away, but I can't reply.

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New York. What a town! If I was here sightseeing, I'd love it. I'm not, though. I'm running away, again, and time is running out. America's a bad place to run to. They have the highest Auror population in the world, followed by Japan. I'm fortunate that there's so many taxis, though. The instant the Portkey landed, I tossed the knife into a rubbish bin, and head out of the door.

I climbed into the first taxi I saw, slamming the door shut and requesting to go to the Statue of Liberty. I've never been before, and I probably won't get to go this time. I'll have to jump ship out of the taxi, since I'm not actually carrying any cash on me. I feel a momentary pang of pity for the cabbie, but I'm sure he'll get over it.

I had to duck down on the back seat as I see Potter and Longbottom running out of the station. They've gotten even faster than I remember. That's not a good thing for me, really.

Now, I'm staying in some fleapit flat in a place whose name I've already forgotten. I've stamped on about fifteen cockroaches so far, and they're taking it personally, calling all their mates to come and join in. Little bastards.

I'm hungry. I've not eaten in two days, since my last meal was interrupted. I hope they turned off the cooker back in that shack. I'd hate to have burned it down. Two days fighting against cockroaches and fretting. Is this the time? Will I be caught? Will they send me back?

I try to put the rumbling in my belly out of mind. I've survived for over a week without food before. I can do it now, and I'll no doubt have to do it again in the future. Deciding on a distraction, I pull out my most prized possession; a photo album. I've had this for all my life, and when I ran, it was one of the only possessions I thought to grab. I've got pictures of me in all stages of my life. When I got to Hogwarts, I didn't take any pictures, since I didn't have my own camera. I bought quite a few pictures off Colin Creevey, since he enjoyed snapping pictures all the damned time. Little prat. There's pictures of all my friends and year-mates. But most of all, there's pictures of Harry Potter. Flying on his broom. Sulking in the common room. Attempting to dance. Happy memories.

I look up sharply as the heavy feeling of an anti-apparition ward goes up. My hand's already drawing my wand, preparing to make another illegal Portkey, but the pillow-over-face sensation of Potter's famous 'ward-bundle' makes me shudder. That bundle pretty much makes fighting impossible. As long as it's up, and it'll probably be tied directly to him, the game's over. No Portkeys. No apparition. Hell, won't even be able to cast a spell.

Again, the door explodes inwards after contact with Harry's boot. He stood in the doorway, alone this time. I guess he knew he wouldn't need back-up. Not after disarming me so completely.

My hands are shaking terribly as I raise my wand. It's pointless, but I can't just let it go. I let out a small sob as my wand sails out of my hand, caught by those blasted seeker reflexes and tucked into his pocket.

A stare off. Those Avada Kedavra green eyes stare at me, and I can see nothing in them. Those eyes used to be so expressive. He wore his heart on his sleeve, and it could all easily be read in his eyes. Not anymore. My crime has killed the 'windows to the soul'. He steps forward, and my fear ramps up. I throw myself off the couch, scrabbling backwards until I hit the wall. I can feel splinters enter my fingers as I push myself back on the rough floorboards, but the pain is practically non-existent in my terror and shame.

He marches forward relentlessly, no fear or hesitation in him. He's like an arrow from a bow, straight, fast and true. He stops bare inches in front of me, staring down at me with those dead eyes as I'm still futilely trying to scabble back further.

He kneels in front of me, staring at me. I'm like a fly in amber under the raw power of that gaze. For a moment, just a tiny, brief moment, I can see the pain in his eyes. The pain that I caused. The pain that will never go away. All because of me.

Slowly, he reaches out with both hands, and my scrabbling becomes thrashing. I have to get away. Either run or die. Which doesn't matter any more. I can't face him. All those things that I've tried to hide, my shame and pain, will come rushing back. He'll know. He always knows.

His hands take hold of my face, slowly turning it towards him. I scrunch my eyes closed, as much as I can. I can't look into those eyes. Everything will come undone.

Slowly, his thumbs rub on my eyelids, prompting me to open them. I try to resist, but I can feel active magic in his fingers, forcing them open. His face moves slightly closer as his eyes lock onto mine, and I can feel a mental probe approaching.

I have impressive Occlumency defences. They've been worked on for a *long* time, constantly reinforced and tied directly to my magic. I am, without a doubt, one of the top five Occlumens on Earth. And I know it's futile. He could rip through my shields like they were tissue paper.

He doesn't, though. I can feel his mind encircling mine, like an ocean surrounding a tiny desert island. He doesn't push through. His mind stays still, content to wait until my concentration wavers. I cannot keep him out. So, I let him in. I lower all of my defences and give him free reign.

Instantly, feelings overwhelm me. My feelings, those I've been suppressing as much as possible using my Occlumency. Waves of rage, pain, misery

and suffering fill my mind, and I know he can feel them. For a few moments, I feel the same as I did when I killed his baby, full of self-loathing.

Slowly, though, I became aware of Harry's powerful mind and magic reaching out and smoothing out the feelings. A voice-but-not-a-voice asks to question me, to find out why I did what I did. At this point, I'm helpless and literally have nothing to lose. I agree, and the memories once more wash over me.

I remember as I accept the proposal, looking at a small, tasteful engagement ring being placed on my finger. I remember my wedding ceremony, my husband looking utterly gorgeous and knowing it. I sigh with a half-chuckle/half-sob as the wedding night runs through my mind, the pair of us insatiable.

I remember the news that I was pregnant, and I remember my husband's elation at the thought. I remember walking across the Ministry of Magic atrium, and slipping on the wet floor. I vaguely remember blacking out and waking up in St. Mungo's, my husband holding my hand, as the Head Healer told me that I had lost the baby.

I killed Harry Potter's baby. I killed my husband's baby. I remember the self-loathing as it formed, pushing me to get away from him as soon as possible, before I cost him any more.

I remember apparating away from the hospital, grabbing my photo album and my wand, before I began running. My sobs are near screams as the pain of my actions, my crime, again washed through my mind.

Harry's mind, though, isn't inactive. He shows me his feelings, his memories. He felt the same pain and almost mind-numbing grief that I felt, but he also showed me his strength. He would do whatever was necessary to protect me. The woman who promised to love him, honour him and cherish him, and the woman who killed his unborn daughter. He didn't see it like that, though. He saw it as an accident. He saw that I was in pain, and offered everything that he was.

He showed me his devastation as I ran away, and he showed me the selfishness of what I'd done. He showed me my arrogance by assuming that I was the only one in pain. He showed me his love for me, and I felt unworthy.

"You're not unworthy." He whispered into my ear as I collapsed, sobbing, into his arms. "You were *never* unworthy."

"I'm sorry!" I sobbed. "I'm so, so sorry! How can you stand to look at me?"

"Because I love you. I've always loved you, and I always will love you. And it's time for you to come home. You're been running too long."

"I can't!" I gasped. "I can't go back, Harry! I killed her! Don't you understand?" I can feel my voice getting louder and more shrill. "I killed her! I killed our baby!"

"You didn't." He said softly, and I can feel the pain in his words. Pain that I, one again, am causing him. "You did not kill her. You had an accident. I don't blame you. It was not your fault."

"I should have protected her!" I snapped. "She was a defenceless baby, and I killed her!"

A sharp slap across the face instantly stops me. Did he just hit me? Did Harry Potter, the poster child for the light, just hit a woman? Damn him... it worked, though. My shock has stopped me babbling.

"I love you." He said stubbornly, and I could see through the mask over those eyes. His pain had never gone away, just like mine hadn't. The pain I had was nothing compared to his. I knew that.

"Please come home." He whispered, staring at me. "I need you. I can't do this alone! I never could! I need you back." It was his turn to cry now, leaving me absolutely shocked. Harry has *never* cried, not even when Sirius was killed. But this... I've made the strongest guy I know cry. My self-loathing peaks again.

"Please come back to me..." He whispered, pulling me closer. "Don't leave me again."

"I can't." I whisper back. "I killed her, Harry. I ended her life because of my own stupidity."

Again, he's pulling my head back, staring into my eyes. And again, I feel his emotions. They're like a tidal wave against the tiny island of my mind. I can feel his pain, but his pain isn't just loss; it's loneliness. He's had to deal with not only the loss of his unborn daughter, but the abandonment of his wife.

I can feel his support, and his love... his love eclipses me, wraps around the terrified, pathetic thing that I've become, and I feel warm for the first time in 469 days. A part of me screams that I don't deserve this. I don't deserve to feel his arms around me.

But a part of me wants things to go back to how they were, however futile that desire is. Things will never be what they were.

"They can be." Harry's voice whispers into my mind. "Only together will we heal. You need me, just as I need you. And we cannot be apart any more. I won't let you go again."

I want to scream and shout, but his mere presence has robbed me of that ability. The power of his personality washes over me again, making me ashamed of my weakness.

"We can try again." He offered. "Together, you and I can overcome anything. I won't let you go. Not again."

A harsh sob erupts from my throat. How can we try again? How can a baby-killer like me even think of trying for another child?

"You are *not* a baby-killer." Harry's voice, dark and menacing, tears through my mind like a missile. "You are my wife and my love. You are mine, and you're coming back with me."

Any desire I have to protest runs and hides at this proclamation. The power of his personality makes me quail. Harry and I have always been equals, always, but in this, he dwarfs me.

I can only ask one question: "How?"

"We will get through this." His mind tells me firmly. "My love for you will help heal you while your love for me will help heal me. Once we've put ourselves together, we'll try again. I love you, and I will not leave you."

Even though we're debating in my mind, I can feel his arms wrap around me and we're squeezed through a tube. I recognise where we land, of course. After all, I decorated this bathroom myself eighteen months ago.

His eyes locked on mine, maintaining the mind-to-mind contact. I can see his hands moving, and I hear water running. He's running me a bath. This used to be one of our favourite activities, back in the day. A hot bath led to some quality snuggling, which of course, led to our unborn daughter. Again, without breaking eye-contact, he lifts me into the bath, my smelly clothes vanishing as I was lifted. The water is the perfect temperature, and he bathes me. 469 days on the run has made my personal hygiene suspect. I want to cover my nakedness, but his eyes never leave mine. I'm helpless to those eyes, always was.

All the time he's washing me, I can feel his mind caressing me, supporting me, providing me with the depths of his love and devotion. After everything I've put him through, he considers himself fortunate that I'm here. This man, this wonderful, incredible man thinks that he's lucky that a baby-killer is back in his life. The shame makes my eyes water, and the shame of that simple action, when I have no right to be in pain, makes the tears worse.

His mind wraps round me like a warm blanket as I'm lifted from the water, and carried into our bedroom. He lays me down, then banishes his own clothes.

I'm near panic. After everything that I've done, the prospect of being naked in a bed with my husband is beyond terrifying. I want to thrash about, but Harry's loving green eyes hold my resistance. I know the true power of his mind. If he wanted, he could implant compulsions directly into my mind. He could make me into a dribbling sexual maniac. But he doesn't.

Instead, he wraps his arms around me and pulls me into a tender hug. The sobs wrack my body as he shares his pain with me. He offers me everything that he is, positive and negative, and allows me to see how much he still cares. He doesn't want sex. He doesn't want to make love. He just wants to hold his wife. He wants to let her know that she's safe, because that will make him safe, too.

My muscles are relaxing in this comfortable, familiar embrace, but my mind is still racing at warp speed. How can he just forgive me? His mind is comforting mine, telling me that there is nothing to forgive. I did nothing wrong. I did not kill our baby. It was an accident. It was a tragedy, but no blame can be assigned. It simply happened. I can also feel him telling me of his pain and regret, but his belief that we would cope together, then his abandonment.

The tears come again, as my body moulds into his and we sob together. His chest is warm and wet as my tears trickle down, while my hair collects his tears. He knows everything that I've done. It's impossible to hide things from Harry Potter. I don't know what the future will bring. My self-loathing is still the predominant emotion in my mind. Only my shame of failing him keeps me there.

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That shame and self-loathing lasted for almost two years. Every night, Harry would carry me to bed, link our minds and let us do nothing but feel. He would show me his pain, diminishing simply because of my presence. It was always there, though, which simply made me hurt. I had caused that pain.

It wasn't until the Intervention that things changed. Harry, under the direction authorisation of the Minister of Magic and the Department of Mysteries, arranged for a ridiculously-illegal summoning ritual. Together, Harry and I called into the ether for the soul of our dead daughter. It's a well-established fact that souls can be summoned, but it's never been tried with a pre-born. No-one knew if the soul will be that of a baby, or if it will be able to communicate.

We know now. Our baby was beautiful. She'd inherited the eyes of power from Harry and, unfortunately for her, the bushy-hair and big nose from me. She appeared to be around twelve years old, and she could speak. And she did.

She forgave me for what I did. She told me that there was no responsibility. The cheeky little thing even made me go and get a dictionary and tell her the definition of the word 'accident'. Definitely my daughter for the bookishness, and Harry's daughter for the cheek. She told me that she knew what had happened and that I was blaming myself.

Harry and I made love that night. Fortunately for everyone's sanity, our daughter's soul had moved back, passing on a message to Harry about how Grandma Lily was taking care of her and teaching her how to prank Grandpa James. We all cried.

I'm in hospital right now. I'm utterly exhausted, but I can't bring myself to sleep. In my arms is a tiny baby girl, scarcely two hours old. During my labour, I stayed silent. The pain was immense, as it felt like our baby was trying to exit my body without using the chute. But this pain was worth it. This pain allowed me, and Harry through his Legilimency, to know that our baby was coming. And here she is. During my labour, for just a brief moment, I thought I could see a soul watching over me, blessing us with a healthy birth.

My name is Hermione Jane Potter. There will be hardships to come in the future, but I will stand, and I will fight, alongside the man who chased me down and brought me home. I have stopped running.