

Storm Track

by Ariadne AWS

Gift for Ubiquirk: Outcast since the war, Severus survives by releasing his pent-up magic under cover of various disasters. For reasons he refuses to understand (or perhaps admit), Hermione has been tracking him. As a hurricane crashes into a seaside amusement park, he decides the game is over.

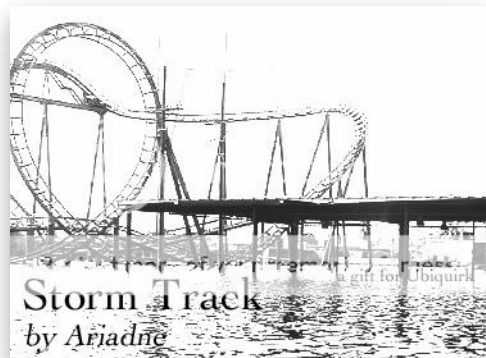
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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Joyfully written for Ubiquirk (it matters) for the Winter 2008 HG/SS Gift Exchange on LJ. Special thanks to my betas and all-around most excellent furies: Anastasia, Annie Talbot, Machshefa, Melenka, Luna, Lady Karelia, and LipstickGoalie.

Original Prompt: DH compliant but EWE. Snape hides as a Muggle from a Wizarding world that thinks him dead. Yet restraining his magic for months at a time proves dangerous, so he has to do large 'discharges' in some unique fashion at quasi-regular intervals. The newest Unspeakable, Hermione Granger, investigates the anomalies, but Snape's too smart for it to be easily deduced. Romance not necessary. Happy ending not necessary.



This is neither my first time nor my last; it is, I am certain, your first. As such, I must do everything in my power to satisfy your curiosity. In this, I cannot fail; you have come to depend on the fullness of this moment in a way I find more than disturbing. You and I cannot continue this game any longer; I simply cannot withstand the distraction of

having you lingering about, just out of reach, any longer. It could prove my undoing, perhaps even my death. I do not pretend to understand what consequences this may have for you, but insofar as your satisfaction is at my command, satisfaction you shall have.

I would not have chosen this setting, but a storm will break where it will, beyond the will of all but the very strongest... and I have no wand, so here we are, on opposite sides of a deserted carousel. Not where I would have chosen; nor you, I think. We are neither of us given to metaphor.

Ah well.

So be it.

The first time it happened, I was watching the lot of you restore the castle.

It surprised me. Not that you all were restoring the castle. Nor that no one saw me; I did not intend to be seen. Just that, after it happened, my headache disappeared for the first time in weeks.

I hesitated on the edge of the forest, certain of imminent apprehension by a phalanx of righteous shining Potterites, but no. No one had noticed that my magic had practically exploded out of me, sans wand.

In such a concentrated burst of good-feeling and magical enterprise, what was a bit more magic?

It quite amuses me that no one will ever know that bricking in Sybil Trelawney's windows was my idea.

But magical enterprises of that scale are rare, and, by the time I needed it again, it was a year later, maybe two (I don't recall) (it doesn't matter), I was alone (as always), and ill (so it seemed), and shaking, in an abandoned railroad car somewhere west of London.

You see well, you didn't, then; how could you? I needed release. I tried not to they would find me and kill me in two spits of a flea's ear.

I can summon your protest in all its sophomoric eloquence. A trial, you'd say, with a brilliant defense by... oh, yes. I quite see your logic.

You may believe that that would work, if you wish. I certainly can't stop you.

It does rather explain why still, after all this time, you're still looking for me. Following, perhaps. No other explanation for your determination than your rampaging sense of justice seems plausible... except (perhaps) for the obvious one, but that cannot be the case...

No. On that score, I will do you the honour of believing you have better sense than that (although at the moment, I cannot be sure, as you haven't even sense enough to get out of this rain...)

But I anticipate myself.

No. West of London, in the railroad car, I needed what came after the release: knowing that I would not need it again soon.

Regardless, that time, I tried to stop it. For reasons I don't always remember, I didn't want, then, to die. I certainly didn't want to be killed.

Perhaps that's what made me ill... trying to stop it, I mean to say. Not wanting to be killed does not ordinarily cause illness.

Of course I couldn't stop it, and I waited, as I had in the forest, for the Unspeakables to arrive. Because of course they would notice such an uncontrolled expulsion of magical power could not go undetected, wand or no wand and, when they did, they would know it was me.

I do not think I flatter myself (it doesn't matter) in believing my wandless self the most powerful rogue wizard then living in Britain.

So I waited in that rank box-car for the door to creak in protest in its rusted tracks, for the light to come blaring in, for the flash of spells that would follow, but no. No one came.

Typical. (Except, later, you. Which is also typical.)

Eventually, I risked departing the rail-yard and, after a wash and a meal from a Muggle shelter, alert to every sound, every movement, I hid. (I was always good at that. Even now, you aren't quite sure I'm here. You will be, and soon, but not quite yet.)

Later, I slept on a park bench, using a discarded newspaper as a pillow.

In the morning, I folded the newspaper. (I always tidy my bed, you see.) Snapping the pages out for a nice, crisp fold (it had been a good pillow, and I could use it again), I read the headline. I couldn't help it; there were words. I read them.

"*Mayhem!!!*" it screamed, and I winced. The italics hurt my eyes, and the undisciplined punctuation... well, it's an atrocity best left to those who don't know enough to get out of the rain. (You should have pulled your hair back, you know. It's blowing into your eyes.)

Even so, though, having nowhere to be, I sat on the bench and read the article.

Once you've been a spy, no one will ever trust you again, so you disappear, and hide, and drift. Sitting on a park bench reading a newspaper struck me, that morning, as a terribly obvious way to hide in plain sight, of course - but so certain was I that I was not being observed, I indulged.

The sun was warm.

The "mayhem" of which my pillow had screamed was this: a commuter train had broadsided a lorry and derailed, death spilling out its doors.

I registered the date and then the time as the moment in the box-car when need had overflowed my control.

Yes, overflowed. It's very much like spilling a potion. Without a wand, there's nothing you can do about it. It's going to hit the floor.

For reasons I don't recall, I scanned the list of casualties and recognized several.

Had you been watching, you might have seen my eyebrow twitch. (I know the effect that has on you, of course. A good spy is observant; a bad one is dead. And I am not, in fact, dead.)

There had been a group of witches on that train, and if their magic hadn't saved them (which, of course, it hadn't), their efforts to save themselves had saved me.

How? Their magic masked mine, you see. (You didn't see then; it wasn't until later that you started to suspect. Chit. You couldn't leave it alone.) I suppose it's possible that even the Muggles, in their panic, sent out not magic, exactly, but something. It may have something to do with metaphysics. I believe they call it religion. Call it what you will. (It doesn't matter.)

By now, if not by then, you've learned that I have to release my magic periodically, or it will release itself. Wandless, in hiding, with or without my volition, it builds, and someday they (or you, if there is a difference) will find me. Someday, unless I'm very, very careful. (Rest assured or don't I've been watching you very, very carefully.)

Where was I?

The park bench. Indeed.

I folded the newspaper again, smoothing the creases precisely, and tucked it into a pocket. It had been promoted from pillow to theory, and it doesn't do to leave those lying about.

(You should know that, but you don't. I've known about you for a long time. A very long time. You do leave such crumbs about, in your righteous pursuit of truth. Justice. Whatever name you've given it. Perhaps I shall tell you that it's nothing more than overactive curiosity and ego that has you standing there dripping by that creaking carousel... or perhaps not. Very probably not...)

It was the third time, or perhaps the fourth, that you began to suspect. I may have been a trifle obvious. In my line of... I shall call it "work"; the term serves as well as any other... at that time, I still found it necessary to be somewhat opportunistic. The British character does not tolerate regular mayhem, certainly not with the regularity or on the scale I require, and especially not in the countryside.

I should never have gone there. The cows...

But really, I had no other choice with the cows, 'though it is not a mistake I need ever make again. The outbreak would have been worse, far worse, had I not... well, you were there within the week. You know what happened.

Even now, sometimes I... no. It simply doesn't do to dwell on cows.

I left the countryside and haunted the cities, and the fifth time (sixth? seventh? I don't recall) (it doesn't matter), you betrayed yourself. (You may believe that you allowed me to glimpse you, but I watched you decide to reveal yourself; you're just not good enough. How it would break you to know that... I shan't tell you.) (It doesn't matter.) Even now you're not entirely certain (are you?) that I'm actually here. I am, of course. Oh, yes.

I saw you, and that's when I knew when I saw you that I had to leave. To get out of Britain.

It was on the crossing that I realised the possibility that has, ever since, served as my strategy. (I won a berth in a card game. Yes, I count cards. No, I will not tell you how I evaded port authority and immigration. Believe what you will that I blend with the shadows, bugged the captain, or know how to swim. Whatever comforts you (it doesn't matter))...

It was on the crossing that we encountered the storm. The crew was Spanish, or Portuguese, perhaps Italian, and they cried out for a miracle.

I couldn't help but chuckle as I answered their prayers.

...

(Pull your hair back, do; it's blowing about frightfully, and it's only going to blow harder...)

...

Where was I?

Ah. Storms.

After a time, I found I had little stomach left for disasters made by humans. There are few enough profligate followers of disaster; most are bottom-feeders with well-coiffed hair and satellite feeds; no, I chose to specialise, to follow only storms. (You might say I gave the other sort up for Lent.) (Or became a vegetarian.) (Something.)

(Your hair. You must pull it back. You cannot see, in this wind and you *must* see...)

Storms. Yes. In this brave new land of opportunity, I escaped the dangers of over-opportunism here, mayhem follows mayhem from sea to shining sea, and to be on time for the next, one needs only The Weather Channel.

(Were I a better man, I would admonish you to avoid the temptation of the internet.)

(Appalling.)

(One or two, perhaps, have a turn of phrase...)

But I was thinking of storms...

You've come alone. (Five points to... no; that is no more.) You've always come alone. I had to make sure; otherwise, of course, I'd have had to... but you see, I never had to, but I could have done. When the death toll climbs high enough, the body count includes our kind; a few more, one way or the other... no one would notice, either way.

I know, you see, because no one has. How Dumbledore would chuckle, if he knew. No, if you'd alerted others, they'd have followed you, and then I would have had no choice but to... when it overflows, wandless, a potion will fall to the floor. Gravity. Reflex. Call it what you will, but I would have had no choice.

Intelligent of you to come quietly. Alone.

But back to my magic. I can guide it, a bit, in a storm. It releases and disperses into whatever maelstrom of disaster it encounters. And if a storm is big enough, you see, it covers ground where our kind live, and if it is of sufficient danger, they will pour their magic out to save themselves, their children, their homes...

Our kind hardly ever run. A strength which has not, historically, been to their advantage.

But that strength weakness whichever you prefer it does provide me with no small measure of cover, from which I work.

(Really, you must get out of the wind. You've been standing, exposed, by that carousel for far too long; do you not see the sign swaying above you? Hear the roof rattling on the penny arcade? Is it time, then, for me to move, to draw you in toward the heart of the park, to the water's edge, where soon the storm surge will rise above the heads of those tall enough to ride this ride?)

So the death tolls have, since I arrived, been a little lower than they might have been.

The damage a little less.

(It is earlier than I would have liked, but I do not like the angle of that sign. It will surely fall, but which way? And of course you cannot see, with your ridiculous hair in this wind... then let us move indoors, but which? All the attractions are abandoned; too close to the water; closed for the season, regardless... Into the Fun House? The House of Mirrors? I spy, said the... fly? Spider? Either way...)

Ah, good; you follow you can't be certain what it is you've seen a wrong-way rippling; some trick of the light? but you have always been curious. (It killed the no, not this time; it saved you this time.) That sign is falling where you were standing; do you not hear? I cannot pause to check on your attention; too soon for you to see me; too soon. The penny arcade roof will be next; I must get you inside...

Move along smartly now; the tide rises, and a house of mirrors is only as tall as its weakest pillar.

...

A few steps inside, a turn, a counterturn, and I wait behind the first bank of mirrors, listening for your footstep, a scraping of sand on board. You, with your wand, could muffle your steps, but you won't so certain you are of the truth you imagine is mine. You would not have lived long under my conditions. Spying is no place for certainty, or for truth, and in their absence what are you?

A slight pillar of intellect and ego with wet hair.

The board creaks out of time with the rising wind. Good. You were always obedient in your lessons.

Do you know the truth of a house of mirrors?

I've had no time to read the angles of this place properly; I shall have to position myself with care. Better here than the fun house, of course; were I given to metaphor I might congratulate myself for this expanse of reflections wherein you may glimpse what you tell yourself you've come for.

Perhaps I shall see whether you've changed. You'll forgive me (or not) (it doesn't matter) if I remain skeptical; I expect that you think you have, but your orderly methods, established in childhood, perhaps inborn, bear the curse of having stood you in good stead, affirmed by all, lauded by... some.

I hear your careful progress and position you by sound, reflecting on the paths I have already traversed in this temporary place to place you within it.

...

Ah. Very well. It's to be that way, is it? Typical Ministry training establish that whatever you seek is not behind you and proceed forward.

Anywhere else, with anyone else, and your lack of imagination would likely be rewarded. Oh, we shall meet eventually (rather sooner than later; do you hear the walls begin to bow? An effect of pressure and wind; both forces will out, do what we will), but not yet, not yet... a little farther now... yes, I shall pause here; this vantage point will serve as well as not.

A muffled thump; a quiet muttering. Were I not devoted to silence, I might chuckle. Not that way, child, not that way you cannot walk through walls, however I might seem to, even without a wand. You cannot trust the usual in this place; you do not yet know the truth of a house of mirrors. Perhaps you shall discern it eventually.

I continue to wait until I hear you pause in what seems to be a junction of several paths. They're all blocked by what you see.

I can almost imagine you thinking.

You've thought your way through what you cannot see in the past, but will it work for you here?

I stifle another chuckle.

A step. I see, via a trick of angles, your hand reaching forward to test for solidity. Yes, that would be your first recourse after the first obstacle. You learn quickly, but your mind has not changed. Still so linear.

Did you think to bring a ball of string?

A small gleam of red, and an X appears, multiplying through the endless avenues of reflection.

Perhaps you did bring a ball of string after all.

And it seems you are determined that this time shall, indeed, mark a change.

I, too, am decided. But you cannot be sure your marks won't prove more useful to your quarry than yourself, in the end.

You still do not know the truth of this place. Very well. Let us continue. How many steps have we traveled? Have you caught a glimpse yet of what you seek? I calculate that a simple half-step to the left and you will be exponentially surrounded by untold repetitions of my image. Are you ready? Are you ready to see where your determination has brought you?

Because you will see. Oh, yes, you will...

The wind pauses, and I take the step. Convenient timing. I hear your breath catch before the outer wall trembles under the buffeting.

Do you imagine I see you? I cannot, from where I am standing, see you, but I can approximate that effect if I recall your height correctly.

I raise an eyebrow.

A sudden creak, an involuntary step backwards, perhaps?

Excellent response. Very well. I shall wait, unblinking, as you choose your next move. I cross my arms.

The floor creaks under your shifting weight, revealing your indecision.

I do not hide my patience. I am certain, now, that you do not know the truth of a house of mirrors, for all your "brilliance," for all your training, and for your simple red Xs, hanging suspended throughout the nonsense of mirrors.

You have, by now, realised that they revealed your position. You may presume to know how, but if you did, this stalking game would have ended. As it hasn't, you don't, and I wait.

The glow from the Xs disappears.

No light remains now; you cannot see me, and my features relax. I don't smile. Nonetheless, I've not been this amused in...

It doesn't do to dwell. Especially not in a house of mirrors by the sea as the penny arcade implodes from the force of the storm, sheets of percussive metal echoing the thunder in the sky.

Still no decision? You cannot stay here; this haphazard structure will fail, from above or below. Surely you see that even in the dark.

I wonder about the carousel ponies and how they fare in the wind. If the carousel stays anchored, they should weather the storm. They cannot drown. They cannot bleed.

Fire, perhaps. With enough friction but the confluence of wind shears to create a spark as the machinery moves against itself unlikely. The tide will take care of any unlikely sparks.

The ponies should weather the storm. Not undamaged. They are without question already scarred. No carousel pony can shield itself from a disintegrating penny arcade.

...

And still you take no step.

Very well.

I move again.

...

Do you suppose penny arcades still take pennies? It seems unlikely...

Names never do catch up with change, do they?

Something to think about in an idle moment... but this is not that.

Good. I hear you walking again.

Is it possible that you've ascertained the truth of how to navigate this place? If you've a light, you're concealing it as you should have done at first it is better to learn quickly without the catalyst of one's own mistakes.

Something to aim for, perhaps, philosophically. That avenue is foreclosed to me. Perhaps to you. I cannot know; it doesn't matter.

I do hope the ponies survive the storm... made of wood, as they are, they may. Not unscarred. But still recognizably ponies at the end. Not like the...

...

What light there was seeping under the eaves is quickly fading. Perhaps by its absence you shall perceive the truth of the mirrors...

Or perhaps your truth will be more mundane.

Which will you choose? Will the absence of light from above cause you to finally, finally look up?

For that is the truth of a house of mirrors. Your path is sure if only, only, you look up. The ceiling cannot lie; a wall is joined to it or it is not. It's a carnival game, not a torture chamber. Mirror, mirror, on the...

Where are you now? I cannot tell. Is that a light? Or have my eyes merely adjusted to the last of the sky, retreating before the storm as it pushes the last of the light and the tides before it?

I move my heel. The floor is still dry...

It is a light, after all.

I see your vague outline as you continue again on the twisting path I have left behind.

In this whisper of light, your shape seems hazy. Softer than I remember. Gentle. Like the eyes of the...

No. I will watch. Decide. React.

Your first time should be your choice. When will you make it? We haven't much time; nothing can stop the storm outside, and this is but a house of mirrors.

You are close. Closer. I might imagine I hear you breathing, your breath coming shallow with near discovery in the darkness, the only barrier between us this single wall of glass.

Concealment is no longer necessary; you are certain I am close - certain because I have allowed you to get this close.

A crack of lightning and you see me staring at you in your chosen mirror. Just my reflection, nothing more. In truth, I am behind you, behind this wall. But I know the angles, and you never did look up.

Your breath stills as you prepare to decide.

I begin to ease around the last barrier. I do not believe you will kill me (does it matter?). Perhaps the thought gives me pause.

A flash of light and the last mirror breaks, out and away, glass falling safely away as if by design, and...

Yes. It was by design. Yours.

The walls buckle. This house is no longer any protection from the raging wind; a section of tin peels away, unanchored by the last mirror, and we are alone under the sky.

Your hair is plastered to your neck as the wind-ripped rain streams across your face.

I speak your name, a whisper, no more. Impossible that you should hear over the wind, the crashing spray, the groaning gears as the carousel twists backward in the wind, oblivious to the encroaching waves.

Impossible that you should hear me, but you do.

I allow you to catch my eye.

And now, in this moment, your cheeks are wet. I shall lie to myself what's one more? it is just the rain, only the rain but the lie will not hold. I will send you back to London, and you know it, but you refuse to turn away, even as a sheet of metal from the ruined arcade slams into the corner post of what remains of this house, falling around us as more mirrors fall as the roof is ripped, in sections, crashing into the high steel-latticed arches of the roller coaster.

Already its seaward side has fallen.

You should turn. You should go. But you refuse. With your eyes, you refuse.

A sudden wrench of wind and your face is pelted with water, and you flinch, and I find my hand rising to your cheek.

I brush the water just the rain, only rain with the backs of my fingers. I will not close the distance to find your skin chill with water, warm with life.

My hand will not linger, but you turn your cheek into my hand, and I find that my hand has opened, my palm open on your skin.

Chill with water. *Only rain.*

Warm with life.

My palm aches with your youth, your hope, your desire. I see it in your eyes, I feel it sear...

I cannot return, and you cannot follow... I will not protect you from my leaving foolish, foolish girl *warm with life* but for only now, for one moment, for one heartbeat in this wild, wind-thrashed night, my hand will shield your cheek from the driving storm.

This much, I allow myself.

This long; no longer.

Longer and I would stay, here, in this place that even now screams as it dies.

More and I would bid you follow.

But I have no connection, no name. Only the habits of a broken mind.

You, I would break.

"Leave." My voice a whisper, no more, and you hear it.

You hear, but I see you search my face. (Leave, quickly; I can hold it back only for so long.)

Your damnable fingertip breaks a drop of water on my skin. It's rain. Only rain.

Leave, making of me what you will. (It doesn't matter.)

It must be your decision to leave (why don't you leave?), to admit I exist but not as you wished... you saw what I did to the cows...

Stop touching me.

I do regret the cows. You would be worse, really, than the cows. You see (you must see), I didn't know them. They were just cows only cows bovine ruminants who had the misfortune to be where I was that I feel such remorse for cows; do you see (you must) do you understand that you must stop following me?

...

Surely you're not *smiling*.

I dislike the ambiguity of women's smiles.

Their eyes cannot lie... yours, are they satisfied?

I release a breath.

Now, please, I beg of you leave now, and leave me to this peace I find in chaos?

I don't speak. You nod anyway.

Your hand lowers; you turn and walk away.

Your hair is still plastered to your face, around your neck in a thick, heavy coil. It will dry and fall softly, as it ought, if you will only get in out of this rain.

...

High above, the force of the storm wrenches a section of the ride away, and a car slips to the jagged edge of a broken track.

Can you not hear? Why, why do you never look up?

I have enough control, only just (justice) enough to lift it to a different path, to start it secretly, safely down another track. Gravity will do the rest, will carry it away, out of sight around a gently sloping curve.

Your path takes you directly beneath where it would have fallen.

And the death toll is lowered (by one), the damage (to you) a little less (it matters).

...

For this storm I have no more magic.

It will build again. I shall find release in another storm, and perhaps yes, I think I shall miss you following me.

No matter. You walk on, passing in safety beneath the broken tracks, and I see only rain, hear only the desolating storm.