

Wacky Woden's Day
A Storm Hound Adventure
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Mirror Magic

Storm Hound

1 – Morning

It was Wednesday – Woden’s Day, and also the day before Halloween.

In Storm’s previous life with the Wild Hunt, the day would have begun at sunset with a race across the sky followed by a feast that would last until Odin passed out in his chair. Now, Storm was happy with a bowl of meaty chunks for breakfast and a walk around Abergavenny when his two human friends, Jessie and Ben, got home from school.

Life still held a few annoyances. Obedience class, where the humans still wouldn’t obey him. Jessie’s insistence on attaching a lead to his collar whenever they went out, as if she was afraid she’d get lost if she wasn’t tied to him.

And, of course, the cat.

Nutmeg lived next door. An aging tabby with sharp claws and a sharper temper. Her human, Mrs Williams, had a voice like a Valkyrie and hurled slippers with bruising accuracy.

The cat was perched on the fence now, watching as Storm dug up the flower bulbs Jessie’s father had planted earlier that week.

You shouldn’t do that, the cat advised. Humans get very funny about their gardens.

Storm shook dirt off his back paws. *They smell poisonous. It is my job to protect this family.*

Nutmeg gave a hiss of laughter. *You – protect them? You lie about and sleep most of the day. I’ve seen you through the windows.*

I do not, Storm said, his fur bristling in annoyance. Anyway, I need my sleep. It’s hard work being a dog in this world, I’ll have you know.

Oh yes, so difficult. The cat yawned. All those meaty chunks you have to eat. I can see how that would wear you out.

Well, what about you? All you do is sit on fences and lick your fur. What’s up with that? All the time, lick-lick-lick. Do you like the taste of yourself? He pulled up the last maybe-not-poisonous-but-taking-no-chances flower bulb and sat on it in case it attacked him.

Nutmeg’s ears flattened. *At least I keep myself clean. Your breath stinks of meaty chunks, you know.*

And you stink of fish. Storm wagged his tail at his own cleverness. *Look at you – you can jump on and off fences and go wherever you want, but all you do is hang about the garden. If I were a cat, I’d patrol my territory, hunt out threats and defeat all my enemies. None of that ridiculous licking.*

Nutmeg ran her paw behind one ear. Well, *if I were a dog, I'd protect my family properly, none of that ridiculous running in circles and yapping.*

The back door opened. “Storm,” Jessie called, “time to come in.”

Storm bounded across to her, turning his head to give Nutmeg one last, contemptuous stare.

A thin flicker of lighting jiggled between mountains, almost as if something in the sky was laughing.



2- Midday

The sun had climbed to midday when Storm opened his eyes. He woke slowly, which strange for him. He was usually up and on his feet seconds after his eyes opened, but for some reason he felt the urge to arch his back and stretch one leg at a time. He extended his claws into the sofa, sighed, then sat down to clean his whiskers.

Hold on. Claws? Whiskers?

He lifted a front paw and saw tabby fur. He felt an irresistible urge to lick it.

No!

His thoughts spun, making him so dizzy he fell off the sofa. Somehow, his body turned itself and he landed on his feet.

He was dreaming. That was it – he was still asleep and trapped in a nightmare. It was that stupid cat's fault.

Humans pinched themselves if they thought they were dreaming. Storm bit his paw and felt the sharp pain but he didn't wake. His tabby fur stood on end. This was worse than when he'd fallen out of the sky and changed from a stormhound into a puppy. That had been humiliating enough, but this was... There were no words for what this was.

Turn me back! he howled. His voice came out as a plaintive meow.

The front door opened. It sounded different, hearing it through cat ears – sharper and higher in pitch.

“Storm!” Jessie called. “I’m home!”

Storm bounded across the room and stopped. He couldn’t let Jessie see him like this. He tried to wriggle underneath the sofa and got stuck.

Jessie’s hands, feeling larger than usual, caught him and pulled him out. “Nutmeg?” she said. “How did you get in here?”

I’m not Nutmeg. I’m Storm! We got swapped. He squirmed, accidentally digging his claws into her arm. *Sorry. I’m not used to those.*

Jessie, of course, couldn’t understand him. Her communication skills had improved over the months and she understood a lot of dog sign language now – feed me; let’s go for a walk; rub my belly. But there’s wasn’t any sign language for *help I’ve been turned into a cat.*

Jessie carried him through the kitchen while he struggled. “Go home, Nutmeg,” she said. “You’ll get us into trouble if Mrs Williams finds you here. Storm, where are you?”

She opened the back door. Mrs Williams came out of her house at the same moment, as if she’d been waiting for them. She carried a wriggling black puppy under one arm.

Storm stared. Did he really look like that? Whoever had swapped them must have got a few details wrong. His ears were *not* that big. And the left one definitely did not flop over his eye in that ridiculous manner.

“I found him in my kitchen eating Nutmeg’s food,” Mrs Williams said. “You need to keep your dog under control.”

“You need to keep your cat under control,” Jessie muttered under her breath.

Storm, I am going to kill you for this, Nutmeg barked. *Change us back now.*

I can’t! Storm meowed. *I didn’t do this.*

Jessie handed Storm across the fence and accepted the wriggling puppy in return. Storm had one moment to exchange a despairing look with the cat before Mrs Williams carried him away.

...A few miles away something slithered out of the sky. It landed near the base of the Sugarloaf Mountain, by the three foothills that look a bit like a giant dog’s paw. The thing was snakelike – a narrow dark strand twisting across the grass, but where it moved, the grass died.

The thing tasted the air with its tongue. The mountains were cold but the town held life and warmth, and... and magic. Not just any magic, but the magic of the Otherworld. The creature uncoiled itself, its yellow eyes gleaming hungrily. It craved magic.

Slowly, oozing, crawling, sliding, it began to move.

It reached the road first. A car rushed by and it shrank back from the noise, then it followed. As it squirmed across the tarmac, its body filled out and turned dull grey as if picking up some of the colour.

By the time it reached the first houses, it was big enough that when a human walked past it only just managed to slither under a hedge to hide.

It turned its head, tracking the path of the humans who walked by. Small ones, talking and laughing, and bigger ones striding along quickly. None of them noticing the creature that lay, still as a shadow, and watched.

Tonight.

It didn't exactly think the word because a thing of slime and darkness couldn't think. It was more instinct than thought – instinct and hunger. The sun was too bright, the streets too noisy, but soon it would be dark and quiet. Tonight it would seek out the source of the magic.



3 – Afternoon

So this was what it was like to be a cat. As Storm had suspected, it was easy. He had his own bed (fluffy and smelling offensive, but comfortable enough), plenty of carpet to scratch his unfamiliar claws on (Mrs Williams didn't seem to like this, which was an added bonus) and his own cat-sized door in the back door so he could come and go as he pleased. Storm had always wondered how Nutmeg got in and out of the house so easily. He'd never quite believed her when she claimed she could unlock human doors.

He explored the house first. He was, after all, a guest here, even if Mrs Williams didn't realise it, and the first duty of a guest was to make sure the host was safe from enemies. He didn't find anything dangerous, unless you counted the towels which were so fluffy and fragrant you might accidentally suffocate. There was also a fluffy robe hanging on the bedroom door, three pairs of fluffy slippers line in a neat row. Why so many pairs? Did Mrs Williams have extra, hidden feet she needed to keep warm?

Ignoring Nutmeg's cat bed, Storm jumped onto a chair and tested his claws on the fabric. Mrs Williams tried to lift him onto her lap, but Storm tested his claws on her too and she released him with a yelp.

Ha! Feel the wrath of my retractable claws.

"What's got into you, Nutmeg?" Mrs Williams said, aiming a kiss at the top of his head. "Has that nasty dog been bothering you again?"

Nasty dog? You can take that back right now.

Storm tried to growl, but found himself purring instead. He stalked away and curled up under the table where the annoying woman couldn't try to pet him.

He might be stuck in a cat body, but his mind was still the mind of a stormhound and therefore capable of great deliberation. The first thought that occurred to him was that he was hungry and wanted meaty chunks. He put that aside and turned his mind to the wrong-body problem. Stormhounds and cats did not swap bodies spontaneously. Therefore someone had done this. Odin, or someone in the Otherworld was playing a joke.

The thought made Storm feel a little better. Otherworld spells of this sort didn't usually last long. They should be back to their own bodies by midnight. Until then, he might as well have fun being a cat.

So, what time did cats get to eat? Storm slunk out from under the table and mewed.

"Hungry?" Mrs Williams said. "Hold on."

Food on demand? Storm watched as the human heaved herself up, meandered into the kitchen, took a shiny pouch out of box and emptied it into a bowl. He'd been right, he thought – a cat's life was easy.

He raced to the bowl, ready to start feasting, only to recoil in horror.

Fish. He hated fish.

Nutmeg sniffed at the bowl of meaty chunks and turned away in disdain. *You expect me to eat that?*

The human girl, Jessie bent to stroke Nutmeg's puppy fur. "What's the matter?" she asked. "You've never turned down lunch before."

I want fish, Nutmeg mewed, but it came out as a yap, Jessie, typical human, completely failed to understand.

"Sorry," she said, "I can't take you for a walk right now. I've got to get back to school. See you later. Be good."

She left the offensive bowl of chunks on the kitchen floor and went out, calling goodbye. Nutmeg sniffed at the bowl again. That really was disgusting. No wonder the puppy always smelled so bad if that was what he ate.

Leaving the kitchen, she explored the house curiously. It was interesting for a while but it didn't take long to go through every room. She tried to jump onto the windowsills downstairs but her puppy legs didn't seem to have the same spring as her own and she fell short. She didn't want to go back into the kitchen because of the stink of meaty chunks, but the glass door was the only place she could see out. She sat on the mat and tried licking herself. *Yuck*. Her tongue was all wrong for the job – big and flappy. She spat out a mouthful of fur.

A tabby face peered through the door at her.

Cat! Storm mewed in Nutmeg's own voice. *You better not be messing with my things.*

Nutmeg tried to twitch an ear dismissively. *I couldn't have less interest in your things, puppy. How do you open this door?*

It's a special stormhound secret.

You don't know, do you? Nutmeg said. She lay down on the mat and heaved a sigh. *All right, stormhound, you've made your point. Undo whatever you did and put us back to normal.*

Outside, Storm in her body, dropped his tail to the ground. *What if I don't want to change back? You keep saying cats are so much better than dogs.*

Nutmeg's tongue flopped out of her mouth. She sucked it back in angrily. *Change us back!*

I can't, Storm wailed. *I didn't do it in the first place. I think it's Odin playing a trick on us.*

You think? She tried to clean her whiskers and remembered she didn't have any.

We'll probably change back at midnight.

Probably. Nutmeg put all her feline scorn into the word. She would have hissed if she could. *Why is your tongue so big? It's not like you use it for anything.*

Relax, Storm said. *You're going to give my body a heart attack, carrying on like that. I'm off to explore my territory. You should try the meaty chunks, they're really good.*

Oh shut up.



4 – Exploration

Storm padded away from the house, shaking his tail at the back door and the trapped cat. Out here he didn't mind so much being a cat. The claws were certainly useful, as was the ability to jump. He sprang up onto the fence and ran along it. Now to explore!

Nutmeg had always made a big thing about being the cat who walked alone, but after an hour of walking alone, Storm still couldn't see the attraction. He'd been born into the Wild Hunt and even now he was accustomed to having his human pack around him.

He passed a white cat sitting on a wall. *Greetings*, he said.

Get lost Nutmeg, the white cat hissed, extending its claws.

Storm would have stayed to fight, but Nutmeg's body filled with the urge to run away. It was all Storm could do to walk on with dignity.

Next, he wandered to the park where he went on walks with Jessie and Ben, but even that was boring without Ben to throw sticks for him to chase. Storm sat for a while, wondering what to do next, then he spotted a human walking along beside a Great Dane and he jumped up.

Viking! he called. *It's me - Storm. I'm a cat for the day.*

Viking growled and lunged at him.

"Viking!" the human shouted, holding him back with both hands. "Stop it! Go away, you silly cat."

Storm fled.

Mrs Williams was watching for him when he limped back into Nutmeg's garden.

"I've got you a treat," she cooed, putting down a tiny china plate. "Salmon. Your favourite."

This was somebody's favourite food? It was pink and squidgy with a vague flavour of old dustbins, with added salt. Storm spat out a mouthful and shook his head. This should have set made his ears flap, which in turn would make Jessie laugh and give him some crunchy treats, but Mrs Williams bent over him and tried to scratch his chin. "You're really not yourself today, are you?"

Too right I'm not myself. Unhand me. He nipped Mrs Williams on the hand. He'd only meant it as a warning but Mrs Williams picked him up around the middle.

"That's it," she said, as Storm's legs dangled helplessly. "I'm taking you to the vet."



5 - Evening

Next door, Jessie was getting ready to go out. “Come on, Storm,” she said, “time for class.”

Nutmeg didn't have time to object before the lead was clipped onto Storm's collar and Jessie was tugging her towards the door.

Another walk? They'd already had one, all around town, while Jessie's annoying brother threw sticks and waved his arms when Nutmeg wouldn't chase them.

Also, the lead was a royal pain. How could anyone jump onto walls and explore other people's gardens when they were tethered to human? Nutmeg was forced to trot along beside Jessie, keeping pace with her. It was completely undignified.

She followed Jessie back outside reluctantly. Then she smelled something strange. She stopped, the silly lead jerking at her collar.

“Storm, heel,” Jessie said.

Couldn't the human smell it? The scent of mountains and darkness and magic – something very old. Something very hungry. Nutmeg's fur prickled.

Jessie sighed and picked her up. “Other people's dog walk along by themselves, you know.”

Other people's dogs aren't a cat. Will you stop a minute? Something is wrong.

Jessie ignored her. A little while later, she set her down again outside a large building and opened the door. Nutmeg forgot everything else in her panic.

The room inside was full of dogs. They all turned to look at Nutmeg as Jessie tugged her inside. She flattened herself to the floor, whimpering.

A lady in a fluffy cardigan bustled up.

“I think Storm is ill,” Jessie said. “He didn't want to come out, and he's hardly eaten anything today.”

The fluffy-lady stuck a biscuit under Nutmeg's nose. It smelled worse than the meaty chunks. “Don't want it?” the lady asked, wagging it about.

Of course I don't. It's horrible. I don't like being a dog. I want to go home.

Mrs Williams was carrying Storm back into the house in a pink cat box as Jessie came home, tugging a reluctant Nutmeg behind her.

Storm clawed at the bars of the box. *I had to go to the vet thanks to you, cat. Did you go to obedience class?*

Nutmeg shuddered. *None of your business.*

“Nutmeg’s off her food,” Mrs Williams said. “She wouldn’t even eat salmon.”

“Storm hasn’t eaten all day either,” Jessie said. “I had to leave obedience class early. He usually likes going but he just lay there and whined. Do you think they’ve caught the same thing?”

You lay and whined? Storm shouted. *You’re going to ruin my reputation.*

Never mind your reputation. I could have died!

“At least they’re fighting as normal,” Mrs Williams grumbled.



6- Midnight

Evening turned into night. The moon drifted across a sky full of cloud. The town was quiet – few humans around now.

Something monstrous slithered along the hedge ways. It had grown, feeding on the warmth of the earth, until it was as long as the cars parked outside the houses. Its scales swarmed with colours picked up from everything it had touched on its journey, but its eyes were the same lightning-yellow, and its constantly-flickering tongue was midnight black, a sliver of shadow in the night.

Ah...

The serpent paused.

Here it was: the source of the magic it had smelled all day. It hissed in pleasure, gazing at the two houses. They were both dark from top to bottom, full of sleeping humans. The serpent could sense the vibrations of their breathing, the little motions as one of them turned over restlessly.

The serpent turned toward the greater source of magic. Hunger surged all through the vast length of its body.

Feed. Destroy. Consume.

The commands came from some instinct deep inside, and its body moved to obey, gliding forward. There was a flap on the door that rattled when the serpent nudged it, and higher up, a window was open. A narrow gap, but it would be enough. The serpent began to reach up and its body became thinner and longer as it stretched. Nearly there. Nearly...

A sudden bang, a flurry of noise and something caught it by the tail – something with teeth and claws. The serpent snapped back in surprise and twisted around.

An old tabby cat bared her teeth.

Begone! Storm yowled. *Go back to the Otherworld where you belong.* His fur stood on end, making him feel twice as big. Only twice as big as a cat, unfortunately. The serpent towered over him.

Storm's tail swished angrily from side to side. He arched his back and hissed. *I believe I just told you to begone.*

And I believe I am hungry and a cat will make an excellent snack. The serpent's eyes narrowed and it lunged. Storm leaped out of the way and twisted mid-air, landing back lightly on his feet. Before he had chance to feel pleased with himself, the serpent struck again and Storm barely avoided the gaping jaws.

He already knew that he was too small and he couldn't defeat this creature alone. But he was a hound of the Wild Hunt and it was his duty to defend his home against invaders. He shot under a hedge, out of reach of the serpent's jaws, then he rushed out and leaped, landing on the monster's back. All his claws stabbed down at once.

Hurrah for claws! Take that, foul beast!

Storm realised his mistake when he tried to pull free and couldn't. He tugged frantically but his claws were stuck fast.

The serpent lashed back and forth and Storm stopped trying to free himself and clung on instead. The world whirled around him, road, houses and cars turning to a dizzying blur. *Begone!* he shouted again, but his voice was weak, lost in the thud of coils on the pavement.

The serpent paused and Storm gasped in a couple of relieved breaths but then he saw the creature's great head turn towards him. Its jaws opened and Storm was gazing straight into the blackness of its throat. He managed to wrench one paw free, snapping a claw in the process, but his other paws remained stuck.

This was it. Goodbye Jessie, goodbye Abergavenny.

And then a blur of darkness dropped from the sky and landed on the serpent's head.

Storm! Nutmeg barked. *You never told me this body could fly. I suppose that's another special Stormhound secret.*

Storm sagged in relief. *It is, and you better not tell anyone. How do I get my claws out?*

Retract them!

How?

The serpent struck at Nutmeg. She jumped aside, flew a few feet and crashed into the hedge. Clearly, she hadn't quite got the hang of flying.

Retract the claws. Right. Storm imagined his claws sliding back into his paws and, slowly, it worked. He tumbled free, arched in mid-air and landed back on his feet. He shook himself, impressed.

Cat, how did you get out of the house?

I told you, cats have secret ways. Watch this!

Nutmeg darted in close to the serpent and seized its tail.

Be careful with my body! Storm mewed.

The serpent whipped its tail sideways and Nutmeg hung on even as the great tail slammed her into the hedge.

She was going to get herself killed at this rate. Storm danced back out of the way. There had to be a way to defeat this creature. What did he know about serpents? They crawled on the ground. Their strength came from the earth. So, if you removed them from the ground, you'd remove a good part of their strength.

At least, he hoped so.

Fly! he yowled.

Nutmeg let go of the tail, grabbed it again and rose clumsily into the air, dragging the serpent with her. The creature hissed in a fury and swallowed half of Mrs Williams's front hedge. Nutmeg howled in panic.

Keep hold, Storm commanded. *You are a cat. Cats are clever and brave and know all the secret ways of this world.*

His words seemed to have some effect. Nutmeg steadied. The serpent continued to hiss and struggle, but its movements looked weaker.

Storm crouched, stretching his claws out. *Now, on the count of three...*

I'm a cat! I can't count.

The serpent twisted free and fell. Storm leaped at it. Nutmeg dropped from the sky at the same moment and they both landed on the creature's dark back. They both hung on, growling, mewling, hissing.

The serpent reared back, shrinking in on itself as cat and puppy attacked together.

In the distance, a clock struck midnight. The clouds parted and the moon shone bright across the street.

Storm felt himself wrenched dizzyingly sideways. He yowled, or maybe he barked, he wasn't sure which.

What's happening? Nutmeg cried.

That was definitely a meow. Storm shook himself, and his left ear flopped over his eye.

I'm back! he barked.

The serpent swung toward him, mouth stretching wide. Storm flew out of reach, feeling the wash of air as the monster's jaws snapped shut behind him. A yowling, hissing missile shot underneath him.

This is how you use claws, dog! Get away from my house, you hideous monster.

Nutmeg hammered into the serpent, her eyes flashing with golden fury. Pieces of multi-coloured scale flew like confetti, dissolving when they hit the ground. The serpent forgot all about Storm and tried to roll over onto its back to dislodge the cat.

Storm leaped onto its belly. *I am Storm of the Wild Hunt, protector of this place. You. Will. Leave!*

Attacked on both sides, the serpent lashed its tail and tried to bite in two directions at once. But it was already shrinking. Storm grabbed hold of its tail and swung it back and forth. *Take that!*

And that! Nutmeg yowled excitedly.

Windows opened along the street. The serpent, smaller than Storm now, tried to slither away, but Nutmeg pounced on it. It dissolved back into shadow. A moment later, there was nothing left of it but an oily patch on the pavement.

"That horrible dog is attacking my cat!" Mrs Williams screamed. A slipper bounced off Storm's head.

Storm gave a happy sigh. Everything was back to normal.



7 – Morning

It was Thursday morning – Thor’s Day. And Halloween.

Well, Nutmeg said, cleaning her face with circular motions.

Well what? Storm asked, sniffing at the fence.

The cat shrugged elegantly. *I suggest we pretend yesterday never happened.*

You mean when we... Storm caught the cat’s glare. *Oh, I see. Yes, I must have fallen asleep and dreamed it all. Good fight, though.*

Yes, Nutmeg agreed, arching her back. *Let’s not do it again.*

Do what again?

Storm wagged his tail. Nutmeg twitched hers in return. They eyed each other for a moment then Nutmeg jumped down off the fence back into her own garden. And Storm, hound of the Wild Hunt, defender of Abergavenny, trotted back to his own house, where Jessie and meaty chunks were waiting.

