

Sneak peek at Book Four
of the Inheritance cycle!
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The Fourth Chapter of the Fourth Book
of the inheritance Cycle

KING CAT

"Where have you been?" demanded Garrow, the lines on his face harsh in the candlelight. "The horses need bringing in."

Eragon did his best to ignore his waking dreams as he stood on the dais in the main hall of the keep, directly to the right of Lord Bradburn's throne. He placed his left hand on the pommel of Brisingr, which was sheathed, and adopted a more casual pose, hoping no one would notice his exhaustion.

On the other side of the throne stood Jormundur, holding his helmet in the crook of his left arm. The hair at his temples was streaked with gray; the rest was brown, and all of it was pulled back into a long braid. His lean face bore the studiously blank expression of a person who had extensive experience waiting on others. Eragon noticed a thin line of red running along the underside of Jormundur's right bracer, from some wound or another, but Jormundur showed no sign of pain.

Between the two of them sat Nasuada, resplendent in a dress of green and yellow, which she had donned just moments before, exchanging the bright raiment of war for garb more suited to the practice of statecraft. She too had been marked during the fighting, as was evidenced by the white linen bandage wrapped around her left hand.

In a low voice, so that only Eragon and Jormundur could hear, Nasuada said, "If we can but gain their support..."

"What will they want in return, though?" asked Jormundur. "Our coffers are near empty, and our future uncertain."

Her lips barely moving, she said, "Perhaps they wish nothing more of us than a chance to strike back at Galbatorix." She paused. "But if not, we

shall have to find other means of persuading them besides gold to join our ranks."

"You could offer them barrels of cream," said Eragon, which elicited a chortle from Jormundur and a soft laugh from Nasuada.

Their murmured conversation came to an end as three trumpets sounded outside the main hall. Then a flaxen-haired page dressed in a tunic stitched with the Varden's standard - a white dragon holding a rose above a sword pointing downward on a purple field - marched through the open doorway at the far end of the hall, struck the floor with the ceremonial staff he carried, and, with a thin warbling voice announced, "His Most Exalted Royal Highness, Grimrr Halfpaw, King of the Werecoats, Lord of the Lonely Places, Ruler of the Night Reaches, and He Who Walks Alone."

A strange title that: He Who Walks Alone, Eragon observed to Saphira.

But well deserved, I would guess, she replied, and he could sense her amusement, even though he could not see her where she lay coiled in the keep of the castle.

The page stepped aside, and through the doorway strode Grimrr Halfpaw in the shape of a human, trailed by four other werecoats, who padded close behind him on large shaggy paws. The four resembled Solembum, the one other werecoat Eragon had seen in the guise of an animal: heavy-shouldered and long-limbed, with short, dark ruffs upon their necks and withers, tasseled ears, and black-tipped tails, which they waved gracefully from side to side.

Grimrr Halfpaw, however, looked unlike any person or creature Eragon had ever seen. At roughly four feet tall, he was the same height as a dwarf, but no one could have mistaken him for a dwarf, or even for a human. He had a small, pointed chin, wide cheekbones, and, underneath unswept brows, slanted green eyes fringed with winglike eyelashes. In the front, his ragged black hair hung low over his forehead, while on the sides and back, it fell to his shoulders, where it lay smooth and lustrous, much like the manes of his companions. His age was impossible for Eragon to guess.

The only clothes Grimrr wore were a rough leather vest and a rabbit-skin

loincloth. The skulls of a dozen or so animals—birds, mice, and other small game—were tied to the front of the vest, and they rattled against one another as he moved. A sheathed dagger protruded at an angle from under the belt of his loincloth. Numerous scars, thin and white, marked his nut-brown skin, like scratches on a well-used chair or table. And, as his name indicated, he was missing two fingers on his left hand; they looked to have been bitten off.

Despite the delicacy of his features, there was no doubt that Grimrr was male, not given the hard, sinewy muscles of his arms and chest, the narrowness of his hips, and the coiled power of his stride as he walked down the length of the hall toward Nasuada.

None of the werecats seemed to notice the people lined up on either side of their path, watching them, until Grimrr came level with the herbalist Angela, who stood next to Roran, knitting a tube sock with six needles at once.

Grimrr's eyes narrowed as he beheld the herbalist, and his hair rippled and spiked, as did that of his four guards. His lips drew back to reveal a pair of curved white fangs, and, to Eragon's astonishment, he uttered a short, loud hiss.

Angela looked up from the sock, her expression languid and insolent. "Cheep cheep," she said.

For a moment, Eragon thought that the werecat was going to attack her. A dark flush mottled Grimrr's neck and face, his nostrils flared, and he stared silently at her. The other werecats settled into low crouches, ready to pounce, their ears pressed flat against their heads.

Throughout the hall, Eragon heard the slither of blades being drawn from their scabbards.

Grimrr hissed once more, then turned away from the herbalist and continued walking. As the last werecat in line passed Angela, he took a surreptitious swipe at the line of yarn that drooped from her needles, just like a playful house cat might.

Saphira's bewilderment was equal to Eragon's own. Cheep cheep? she asked.

He shrugged, forgetting that she could not see him. Who knows why Angela does or says anything?

At last, Grimrr arrived before Nasuada. He stopped and inclined his head ever so slightly, displaying with his bearing the supreme confidence, even arrogance, that was the sole province of cats, dragons, and certain highborn women.

"Lady Nasuada," he said. His voice was surprisingly deep, more akin to the low, coughing roar of a male wildcat than the high-pitched tones of the boy he resembled.

Nasuada inclined her head in turn. "King Halfpaw. You are most welcome to the Varden, you and all your race. I must apologize for King Orrin's absence; he could not be here to greet you, as he wished, for he and his horsemen are even now busy defending our westward flank from a contingent of Galbatorix's troops."

"Of course, Lady Nasuada," said Grimrr. His sharp teeth flashed as he spoke. "You must never turn your back on your enemies."

"Even so... . And to what do we owe the unexpected pleasure of this visit, Your Highness? Werecats have always been noted for their secrecy and their solitude, and for remaining apart from the conflicts of the age, especially since the fall of the Riders. One might even say that your kind has become more myth than fact over the past century. Why, then, do you now choose to reveal yourselves?"

Grimrr lifted his right arm and pointed at Eragon with a crooked finger topped by a clawlike nail, shocking Eragon out of his latest round of waking dreams, which had involved an Urgal, a dwarf, and a pair of swords made of ice.

"Because of him," growled the werecat. "One does not attack another hunter until he has shown his weakness, and Galbatorix has shown us his: he will not kill Eragon Shadeslayer or Saphira Bjartskular. Long have we

waited for this opportunity, and seize it we will. Galbatorix will learn to fear and hate us, and, at the last, he will realize the extent of his mistake and know that we were the ones responsible for his undoing. And how sweet that revenge will taste, as sweet as the marrow of a tender young boar.

"Time has come, human, for every race, even werecats, to stand together and prove to Galbatorix that he has not broken our will to fight. We would join your army, Lady Nasuada, as free allies, and help you achieve this."

Whatever Nasuada was thinking, Eragon could not tell, but, for himself, he was impressed by the werecat's speech, as was Saphira.

After a brief pause, Nasuada said, "Your words fall most pleasantly upon my ears, Your Highness. But before I can accept your offer, there are answers I must have of you, if you are willing."

With an air of unshakable indifference, Grimrr waved a hand. "I am."

"Your race has been so secretive and elusive, I must confess, I had not heard tell of Your Highness until this very day. As a point of fact, I did not even know your race had a ruler.

"I am not a king like your kings," said Grimrr. "For the most part, werecats prefer to walk alone, but even we must choose a ruler to lead us to war when we go."

"I see. Do you speak for your whole race, then, or only for those who travel with you?"

Grimmr's chest swelled, and his expression became, if possible, even more self-satisfied. "I speak for all of my kind, Lady Nasuada," he purred.

"Every able-bodied werecat in Alae gasia, save those who are nursing, has come here to fight. There are few of us, but none can equal our ferocity in battle. And I can also command the one-shapes, although I cannot speak for them, for they are as dumb as other animals. Still, they will do what we ask of them."

"One-shapes?" Nasuada inquired.

"Those you know as cats. Those who cannot change their skins, as we do."

"And you command their loyalty?"

"Aye. They admire us... it is only natural."

If what he says is true, Eragon commented to Saphira, the werrecats could prove to be incredibly valuable.

Then Nasuada said, "And what is it you desire of us in exchange for your assistance, King Halfpaw?" She glanced at Eragon and smiled, then added, "We can offer you as much cream as you want, but beyond that, our resources are limited. If your warriors expect to be paid for their troubles, I fear they will be sorely disappointed."

"Cream is for kittens, and gold holds no interest for us," said Grimrr. As he spoke, he lifted his right hand and inspected his nails with a heavy-lidded gaze. "Our terms are thus: Each of us will be given a dagger to fight with, if we do not already have one. Each of us is to have two suits of armor made to fit, one for when on two legs we stand, and one for when on four. We need no other equipment than that: no tents, no blankets, no plates, no spoons. Each of us will be promised a single duck, grouse, chicken, or similar bird per day, and, every second day, a bowl of freshly chopped liver. Even if we do not choose to eat it, the food will be set aside for us. Also, if you should win this war, then whoever becomes your next king or queen - and all who claim that title thereafter - will keep a padded cushion next to their throne, in a place of honor, for one of us to sit on, if we so wish."

"You bargain like a dwarven lawgiver," said Nasuada in a dry tone. She leaned over to Jormundur, and Eragon heard her whisper, "Do we have enough liver to feed them all?"

"I think so," Jormundur replied in an equally hushed voice. "But it depends on the size of the bowl."

Nasuada straightened in her seat. "Two sets of armor is one too many, King Halfpaw. Your warriors will have to decide whether they want to

fight as cats or as humans and then abide by the decision. I cannot afford to outfit them for both."

If Grimrr had had a tail, Eragon was sure it would have twitched back and forth. As it was, the werecat merely shifted his position, as if uneasy to be standing in one place for so long. "Very well, Lady Nasuada."

"There is one more thing. Galbatorix has spies and killers hidden everywhere. Therefore, as a condition of joining the Varden, you must consent to allow one of our spellcasters to examine your memories, so that we may assure ourselves that Galbatorix has no claim on you."

Grimrr sniffed. "You would be foolish not to. If anyone is brave enough to read our thoughts, let them. But not her," and he twisted to point at Angela. "Never her."

Nasuada hesitated, and Eragon could see that she wanted to ask why but restrained herself. "So be it. I will send for magicians at once, that we may settle this matter without delay. Depending on what they find - and it will be nothing untoward, I'm sure - I am honored to form an alliance between you and the Varden, King Halfpaw."

At her words, all of the humans in the hall broke out cheering and began to clap, including Angela. Even the elves appeared pleased.

The werecats, however, did not react, except to tilt their ears backward in annoyance at the noise.