

Courage of Falcons – Chapter 2

written by Holly

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Dghall Draclas came roaring out of unconsciousness like a swimmer trapped underwater who at the last possible instant breaks free from his trap and bursts to the surface. He lunged to his feet, gasping, his eyes open but for an instant unfocused.

His body burst with uncontainable energy. He felt as if he could fly, as if he could run from one edge of the known world to the other without his feet ever touching the ground, as if he could rebuild the Glass Towers single-handed. He had a hunger that he hadn't felt so overwhelmingly in years; he desired sex with the obsessive full-body yearning of a young man.

He stared around him at blurred bright colors and at shapes that he could not force to resolve into anything meaningful. The voices in his ears were clear and sharp, startlingly loud, full of nuances and depths but lacking meaning. Smells filled his nostrils, pungent and heady and rich. It was all new, all wondrous, all incomprehensible but glorious.

I've been reborn, he thought. Have died, have come into the world in a new body. I am once again a squalling infant, and in a few moments or a few days I'll forget that I am Dghall Draclas

Sound was the first thing to resolve into comprehensible patterns, the first thing to shatter his illusion. "I don't know whether she's going to survive the shock."

“What about him? He looks healthy as peasant hell.”

“Dghall? Can you hear us? Can you see us?”

“Nothing. Shes paid a terrible price for nothing.”

Sight resolved next. He was in a tent . . . no. He was in the tent, where he and Hasmal had been pulling the souls out of Dragons. He was standing up, weaving from side to side, with a soldier at either side keeping him from falling on his face. He was looking down Jaim stared up at him, Yanth and the healer Namele were crouched over a white-haired woman that he did not recognize.

He licked his lips, and they felt . . . different. Thicker, firmer, moister. He still felt that wondrous energy, that illusion of incredible strength, that inescapable sexual fire. “What . . . happened?” he asked, and wondered at the new depth of his voice, at the richness and the range. At the clarity of the sound when he spoke, at the presence of soft sounds he hadnt heard in years. Decades.

A relieved smile flashed across Jaims face. “Dghall? You with us?”

Dghall nodded. “Yes.”

“No time for explanations then. A Dragon pulled Hasmal physically through the connection between them. Hes torturing him now. If you cant pull the Dragons soul from his body, hes going to kill Hasmal. You dont have much time; Hasmal looks bad.”

Yanth and the healer dragged the old woman out of the way, and Dghall dropped to his knees beside Jaim. He stared into the viewing glass Jaim indicated, and saw quick flashes of Hasmal, of a knife, of blood and horror. He heard a scream whisper-soft through the viewing-glass connection but no less chilling for its lack of volume, and heard a gentle, soothing voice

say, "More. Or Ill cut out a lung, dear fellow, and pull it out through your back. You really only need one, you know."

Jaim said. "Hasmal managed to plant a talisman on the bastard only a few moments ago. Its been going on like this ever since. Hes been lying making up all sorts of wild stories and talking as fast as he can. But the snake-futtering whoreson keeps cutting him anyway." Jaims voice sounded tight and dry in his throat.

"Ill get him," Dghall said. "Ill stop this."

For the moment he didnt question his strength. He accepted it, and with it the miracle that had brought him back from sharply remembered pain and utter exhaustion. Jaim handed him a featureless gold ring attached to a tripod of twisted silver wire; this would become a tiny Mirror of Souls a house and a prison for the soul of the Dragon who tortured Hasmal. He set it on the rug directly in front of him and with a quick swipe of his index finger scraped a bit of skin from the inside of his cheek.

Hed refined his technique since the first time hed snatched a Dragon soul from its captive body, but the process was still fraught with danger. "Have them watch me," he said to Yanth. "If you have any reason to think the Dragon has won and has pushed my soul into the ring, give them a signal. Theyre to kill this body without question."

Jaim paled. "How can I know?"

Dghall shrugged. "You might not. You might make a mistake. But, Jaim, you listen to me. Better you make a mistake and kill me by accident than that you accidentally let a Dragon live. You understand?"

The young man looked at him with frightened eyes and nodded slowly.

Hasmal screamed again.

"I have to do this," Dghall said. "Whats the Dragons name?"

Jaim said, "Hasmal has called him Dafril."

Dghall nodded. "Dafril." He crouched over the tiny tripod. He rested his hands on the viewing glass that connected to Dafrils soul, and willed his soul to link through that ethereal connection to the monster at the other end. When, after a moment, he felt the hot darkness of that evil other, he concentrated all his will on the band of gold, and said:

*"Follow my soul, Vodor Imrish,
To the Dragon soul of Dafril,
To the usurper of a body not his own,
And from this body expel the intruder.
Bring no harm to the intruder,
The Dragon Dafril.
Instead, give his soul safe house and shelter
Within the unbroken circle before me
Unbroken that it may guard
Dafrils immortality, and
Protect the essence of his life and mind,
While safely reuniting the body and soul
Of him whom Dafril has wronged.
I offer my flesh all that I have given
And all that you will take,
Freely and with clear conscience,
As I do no wrong,
But reverse a wrong done.*

White-hot magical fire burned through him once more, searing the anchor that held his soul to his own body, searing the tenuous connection between him and the Dragon, and within the blink of an eye enveloping the Dragons soul.

The fire pulsed and drew, and he felt first astonishment and

then rage from Dafril. Because Dafrils soul could have no permanent anchor in the body he had stolen, the fire ripped him loose and pulled him toward Dghall as fast as light raced through a keyhole. Dghall braced and the enemy soul was upon him in the same instant; and this enemy held power he had never experienced before.

Dafrils soul dug into his mind and burrowed into his flesh seeking purchase; the Dragon fought with a thousand years of experience and cleverness to pry Dghall from his body and force Dghalls soul into the eternal prison of the ring. Dghall strengthened his connections with his own flesh, knowing as he did that had he tried to capture this Dragon before, he would have been the loser in the struggle. As it was, he felt he was fighting an octopus no sooner had he shored up one weak spot than Dafril had wedged a tentacle into another and dug in. Every self-doubt, every half-remembered shame, every wrong hed ever done anyone became a weak point that the Dragon exploited.

He caught brief thoughts and images from his enemys mind; he discovered he was fighting the head of the Dragons. Dafril was the monster who had conceived the immortality engine a thousand years before, and had planned out and designed the Mirror of Souls. This was the very monster who, when the Wizards War turned in favor of the Falcons, had gathered his faithful followers and locked all of their souls into the Mirror of Souls, priming it to bring them back when the world was ripe for their return. This was the master.

Dafril reached into his mind with a will forged of iron, and drove commands like knives into his soul. Give in. Give up. Surrender.

Dghall gathered his strength and channeled purpose and determination. He visualized himself as the core of a sun, burning everything that was not him, expanding with unstoppable power, filling all the cracks and crevasses, all

the weaknesses and shames and uncertainties of his existence with the pure fire of his life. He accepted his self-doubt and admitted his imperfections, and when he did, he no longer questioned his worthiness to exist.

At the moment that Dghall accepted himself as he was, Dafril lost his hold. His soul erupted from the center of Dghalls chest in a fiery river that poured into the center of the ring. The light began to spiral around the rim, and the room filled for an instant with a deafening wall of sound a wail of terror and rage so loud Dghall felt it more than he heard it. Fog poured out from the center of the fire, white and dense and ice-cold. And for just an instant, Dghall choked on the stink of rot and honeysuckle.

Then the air cleared and quiet returned.

Before him, pure golden light rose upward through the center of the tiny tripod and swirled into the ring, spiraling slowly. It had become the Mirror of Dafril a thing of beauty with a heart of evil.

Dghall shuddered and looked up at Jaim. "I beat him," he said quietly. "I beat that monster. Hasmal should be safe now."

Jaim stared into his eyes, and Dghall became aware of the point of a sword pressed lightly against his back, high on the left ribcage. A downward thrust would shove it through his heart and kill him in an instant. He recalled his peril and realized its extent as he saw the doubt and the distrust in the eyes of the man who held his life in a word.

Jaim's hands trembled. He nibbled at the corner of his lower lip. He stared at Dghall as if staring could strip away the skin and bone and reveal the shape of the soul beneath. "Tell me something that only you and I would know," he said.

Dghall took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He shook his head. "That wouldn't work. Dafril's soul would have had

immediate access to my memories. He could tell you anything I could."

Jaim frowned. A spot of blood appeared on that lower lip, quickly licked away. Abruptly he laughed and looked up at the guard. "Hes Dghall," he said, and the pressure of the sword at Dghalls back vanished.

Dghall nodded. "I am. But how could you be sure?"

Jaim said, "Dafril would have told me something to convince me he was you, in order to save his life as quickly as possible. Only you would say something that wouldnt give me any reassurance at all."

In the viewing glass, Hasmal was smiling through blood and pain. "Youre the rightful owner of the body, arent you?" he was saying.

Dghall felt he could relax. Hasmal would be taken care of by the grateful man who had gotten his life back. Meanwhile, he, Dghall, could take the time to find out what had happened to him. He stretched and pulled his hands away from the viewing glass that still showed images of Hasmal. "Tell me how I got my strength back."

Jaim glanced at the old woman, still lying where Yanth and the healer had dragged her. "Alarista knew she couldnt take on the Dragon who was torturing Hasmal and win. So she fed her youth and her strength to you. You look like youre in your late thirties or early forties now."

Dghall looked at his hands really looked at them for the first time since he woke up. The skin was smooth, the arthritis that had bent his knuckles sideways and swelled them into knots was gone. He made a fist and saw the muscle below the webbing between his thumb and index finger bulge, big as a mouse. The air flowing into and out of his lungs moved slowly and easily. His spine felt straight and strong, and no dull throb of pain

grabbed at him when he arched his back or turned his head. And lust coursed through his veins and filled his groin with urgent hunger.

He was young again.

And Alarista was old.

He twisted around and stared at the wasted body and wrinkled face of the woman across the tent. That was Alarista? She had sacrificed herself to save Hasmal; had torn most of the years of her life away and gifted them to him. He tried to conceive a love that would do that in all his years, he had known and desired and enjoyed many women, but he had never found the one woman for whom he would move the world.

He envied her the power of her passion, and realized in the same instant that he could not keep the gift that she had given him. He had to return her life to her, though he didnt know how.

He turned back to the viewing glass as he heard Hasmal say, "Will you cut me loose? I need a healer."

"You dont know who I am, do you?"

Through the eyes of the man Dghall had just restored to his life, Dghall saw Hasmal shake his head. "Someone who appreciates having his body back, I hope."

The man watching Hasmal laughed, and Dghalls attention snapped fully back to the viewing glass. He shuddered at the sound of that laugh. It was wrong. Cruel. It would have sounded right coming from Dafril but Dghall knew hed banished Dafril to the ring in front of him. Which suggested that the man whose body Dafril had claimed had been evil, too.

"You have no idea how grateful I am," the man told Hasmal. "There I was, ready to do wondrous things, and suddenly that lying Dragon ripped me from my body and threw my soul into the

Veil. I wasn't dead, but I wasn't alive, either. Things hunt between the worlds did you know that? Vast cold monstrous hungers that seek out the bright lights of souls trapped in their lightless void so that they can devour them. Annihilate them. Other souls were trapped there with me I watched darkness swallow some of them. They're gone forever. I barely evaded that same fate twice. Twice. Being trapped in the infinite blackness of void, hunted by roving nightmares-made-real, facing eternal extinction at any moment – I still don't know if there's a true hell, but the horrors of that place will do for me. You, or rather the one you summoned, pulled me out of that.”

He'd been watching Hasmal's face while he talked, moving closer step by slow step. Twice he'd glanced at the knife in his hand.

His words created an image of gratitude, but some edge to his voice spoke of darker emotions. “You and your unseen friend have powerful magic at your disposal. You're Falcons, aren't you?”

Hasmal's face showed that he had heard that edge too. He nodded, but warily.

“Working with Ry Sabir.”

Another slow nod.

“I thought as much. Ry's my cousin.”

Hasmal tried a cautious smile, but it died on his face.

“Good guess,” the man said. “We weren't friends, Ry and I. My name is Crispin Sabir. Perhaps you've heard Ry speak of me?” A soft chuckle. “I see from your expression that you have, and that Ry was careful to tell you all my best points.”

Dghall's fists clenched into tight balls. Crispin Sabir. Of all the Sabirs Dghall had encountered in his years of service to the Galweigh Family, Crispin Sabir was the closest thing to

incarnate evil he had ever encountered. Hasmal couldn't have fallen into worse hands.

"I helped you," Hasmal said.

"Well, yes. Undeniably. But I don't give that fact much weight. I'm grateful to have my body back please don't think I'm not. But you were only trying to save your own life when you summoned your friend."

"Are you going to let me go?" Hasmal asked.

Crispin Sabir was quiet for a long time. A very long time. Dghall felt his muscles ache with the tension of waiting. Beside him, he heard Jaim's shallow breathing, and movement as Yanth crouched at his left shoulder.

"You're a Falcon. My magic can't touch you. You're shielded somehow I can't even see the shield, but I can feel its effects. I can't control you. I can't make you work for me. If I set you free, nothing I could do would guarantee that you won't turn on me."

"My word "

"I have no love for the trappings of honor, you. I've given my own word countless times, and have broken it in the next breath. Expediency rules honor you know this and I know it, and I would have it no other way. But because that is true, your word is no currency I'd care to spend."

"I've done nothing to harm you."

"Not that I know of. I grant you that. But you can't guarantee that you won't do something to harm me in the future."

Hasmal grimaced. "I swear on Vodor Imrish, my word " he started to say again, and again Crispin cut him off.

"No. Don't waste your breath or my time. I must do something

with you. You might make a good prisoner, or fetch a decent ransom. But I doubt that any ransom I could get from you would be worth the trouble you would cause me.”

Jaim asked, “Cant you do something? Travel back through the viewing-glass link force that Sabir bastard to let him go?”

Dghall gritted his teeth. “Falcon magic cannot coerce. It is purely defensive. Most times, thats enough. But Crispin Sabir is the rightful soul in his own body I cannot do anything that will force him from the choices he makes of his own free will.”

Dghall felt fingers tighten around his arm, and he turned from the viewing glass to find Yanth a mere hands breadth from his face. “Dragon magic could force him. Wolf magic could force him.”

Dghall rested a hand atop Yanths and willed himself to calm. “Agreed. But I am neither Dragon nor Wolf. I am Falcon, and sworn to follow the path of Falconry. As is Hasmal.”

“You have to save him,” Jaim said. “Alarista gave you her life so that you could save him.”

Dghall turned to face Jaim. “Perhaps I could save his body, but it would be at the price of my soul, and his. Jaim, if he chose to turn away from the Falcon path, he could, perhaps, save his own life. Instead, he holds his shields in place and so protects his soul.”

“Save him,” Yanth snarled.

“There are things worse than death,” Dghall said softly. “Things more terrifying, more painful. And far more lasting.”

“You quaking coward,” Yanth said. He started to draw his sword. In a flash, three guards blades pointed as the young swordsmans throat. Yanth glared at them and turned to Dghall. He said, “If I could, Id cut you a spine, you jellyfish.”

In the viewing glass, Dghall saw Crispin rest his blade against the rope that held Hasmals left wrist. He had moved closer to the trapped Falcon. He said, "Perhaps I ought to let you go. I wonder if you would be as grateful for your freedom as I am for mine."

Hasmal suddenly smiled, and said, "Dghall, hear me. I want more time. I am not done here."

"You're done here," Crispin said, and in a stroke almost too fast to follow, buried his knife to the hilt in Hasmals heart.

Yanth roared, "NO!" and Jaim made an inarticulate cry. From her place on the floor near the healer, Alarista roused from her motionless sleep, keening."

Hasmal gasped. His eyes went wide, and then closed. Dghall held his breath. Hasmals words rang in his head – "I want more time. I am not done here." Hasmals message had been a code; it spoke of a plan that Crispin Sabir could not suspect, and would not believe.

"More time," Dghall whispered, praying that Hasmal would succeed. "More time."

Within an instant, a faint white light formed around Hasmals face, so that his features seemed to be hidden by a thin fog. The expression of pain that had twisted his mouth slowly seeped away; he looked peaceful, and somehow triumphant. The faint white cloud of light grew brighter and spread down his body, setting his torso glowing first, then illuminating his arms and legs. Dghall could see the changes clearly Crispin was unmoving, staring at the body. The only sound to come from the viewing glass was the sound of his breathing, which grew harsher and faster as the light surrounding Hasmals body grew brighter. When his entire body was bathed in the light, the nimbus surrounding him grew brighter, then brighter yet, until it was too brilliant to look at directly. Crispin averted his eyes, then glanced back as shadows in the room where he stood

changed.

The light had lifted away from Hasmal's body. It maintained its man shape for a moment, then coalesced into a tight, brilliant ball of white fire.

"Get away from me," Crispin whispered.

The sphere of light began to float toward him, soundless, slow, inexorable.

In the viewing glass, Dghall saw one of Crispin's hands raise to form a Wolf power-hold. Light streamed from Crispin's fingertips, pouring through the radiant sphere. But the sphere was undamaged. Indeed, it grew brighter, then larger. It kept floating toward Crispin, still silent, unhurried, utterly implacable.

Crispin turned away at last and began to run.

In the next instant, the view in the glass became whiteness brilliant blinding light.

Then blackness.

In the tent in the mountains far to the south of Calimekka, wind set tent flaps shuddering and snapping, and cold air blew through the gaps in the waxed cloth. Yanth and Jaim stared at each other, and then at Alarista, who still lay unmoving, her head thrown back, her eyes open and focused on nothing. She did not cease her keening; her thin, frail voice shredded the silence.

Yanth spoke first. "What happened? What was that?"

Jaim said, "Hasmal took over Crispin's body like the Dragons did."

Dghall shook his head. He said, "Hasmal's last words were quoted lines from the Secret Texts, from the Book of Agonies.

The whole passage goes:

Then, at the moment of his death, Solander spoke into the Veil. "More time," he cried. "I am not done here."

From within and beyond the Veil the gods listened, and though his body was broken beyond saving, they had pity on Solander, and did not call his soul away from the world. Instead, in sight of Dragons and Falcons, Solander took form as a sun, as a light unto the world, rising from his shattered shell.

And he spoke to all who watched, saying to them, "I am with you still."

And at his words the Dragons feared, and the Falcons rejoiced.

Jaim said, "His body is dead, but his soul is . . . that light?"

"I believe so."

"Then what will happen to him now?"

Dghall touched the darkened viewing glass. "We can only wait to see."

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