

# Courage of Falcons: Chapter 1

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

*Nothing tears at the thoughts like a house abandoned. Its empty rooms whisper of tender memories forgotten, of the ghosts of joy and pain left to wander unheeded, of dreams dead of neglect. Here, where once people lived and loved, brought forth life and faced death, I run my fingers along crumbling masonry and shiver at the unimaginable loss of the unknowable dead, and I flee in dread lest the soul of this forgotten place waken and cling to me and claim me . . . and refuse to let me leave.*

*Vincalis the Agitator, from The Land Beyond Loss*

A late-season blast of cold wind set the walls of the tent snapping, and blew icy mountain air through tied-down flaps. Alarista crouched inside, looking from viewing glass to viewing glass, fighting down panic. SheIn two glasses, she had twin views of the inside of a carriage cruising through Calimekkas narrow back streets Kait and Ry escaping from the Dragons with the Mirror of Souls. The steady clatter of the horses hooves counterpointed Kait, Ry and Ians quiet recounting of what had happened to each of them since last theyd seen each other. In another glass, she could see the remains of some delicate contrivance of crystal spires and silver gears lying in ruins on a worktable. The two voices whispering from that viewing glass were shrill with fear.

" . . . I just found it this way. Shamenar was in here working on it, and now hes gone, too. It will be a months work at least to restore it, if we can even find Shamenar –"

"You think they got him?"

"I dont want to think . . ."

Another glass, another view. Through the eyes of someone running, a long, dark corridor illuminated by a the runners coldlamp shadows dancing back, then leaping forward, fantastic shapes crawling up the walls and resolving into mundane objects. The only sound at the moment the runners harsh breathing. Whoever he was, hed been down four branches of the corridor already, had asked the first guard he came to if anyone carrying anything had passed that way, and had, on being told no one had, immediately turned back and repeated the process down the next branch.

A dozen more glasses that showed groups of people standing or sitting and talking, or that revealed fountains, or gardens, or books or papers being slowly perused. Several glasses that were temporarily dark their sources asleep, or possibly dead. A hundred more glasses lined to one side, these never activated. With Kait and Ry gone, they probably never would be, but Alarista kept them at her side because doing so was the procedure that Dghall and Hasmal had worked out. More than once in the past several days a glass had come suddenly to life, and one or the other of them had learned something valuable. Until all hope was gone, she would cling to that procedure.

Hasmal had been gone, she estimated, half a station snatched bodily from the tent by some unimagined Dragon magic and taken . . . somewhere. So far, not one of the viewing glasses had revealed the view she sought a glimpse of Hasmal. She whispered an unending prayer to Vodor Imrish, asking that if he still listened and he still loved her he would give her back Hasmal. If she could see him, just for an instant, just to know that he was still alive, she would be able to breathe again.

Hands pulled apart the tent flaps and Yanth slipped between them. "The healer is on the way," he told Jaim. "Any sign of

Hasmal in any of the glasses?"

Jaims voice was soft. "She hasnt moved, so I dont think so."

Alarista summoned the energy to answer them, just to let them know she could hear them and that she was still aware of the world around her, if only marginally. "No sign yet."

"Im sorry. Is there something I can do to help?"

"Stay close," she said. "If anything changes, I might need both of you."

The healer came through the flaps a moment later, dragging her kit. She knelt beside Dghall and unrolled it. The woman was one of Dghalls people part of the army hed built months earlier. She was a Falcon, older and well-trained in the healing magics, and calm enough considering the circumstances. If he had any chance of getting better, the healer would make the most of it.

The guards knelt quietly along the tent walls, swords in hand; they hadnt laughed or joked since Hasmal vanished in a scream and a flash of light. They watched, tense and scared. It had been their responsibility to kill Dghall or Hasmal if a Dragon soul, drawn through but not successfully locked into one of the miniature soulmirrors, possessed either of them. Now Dghall lay unresponsive on one of the mats, and Hasmal was gone, and Alarista had already told them she didnt have either the strength or the set of magical skills that had let Dghall and Hasmal successfully capture so many Dragon souls. They knew that if she took on a Dragon, they were likely to have to kill her.

A hand gripped her shoulder, and she jumped. "Look!" Yanth whispered, and pointed at one of the viewing glasses that had until that instant been dark.

She turned to the sudden light, to the quickly resolving

image, and she gasped. Hasmals face was suddenly very close to her own; it had been cut across both cheeks and over both eyelids, and blood caked the wounds. Always pale, his skin had taken on the color of bleached bone. She could count the beads of sweat that rolled across his forehead and marked his upper lip. "We found a way to make our own Mirror of Souls," he whispered.

The image danced down to a long, bloody knife, and to a thumb that tested the edge of it. "Really? Tell me more."

"Ill . . . Ill tell you anything you want to know. Anything."

A soft chuckle that raised the hair on the back of her neck and made her stomach churn. "I know you will. First tell me how you made it. Well get to how you used it soon enough."

Alarista gripped Yanth's hand and squeezed. "He's torturing him."

"I know."

"Oh, gods! Oh, Hasmal! We have to help him."

"I know. But how?"

Alarista couldn't turn her eyes away from the nightmare in front of her. "Ill have to draw the Dragon's soul to me. Ill have to capture it."

"You couldn't do it before," Jaim said quietly.

"Ill just have to do it this time."

"And if you fail, we lose Hasmal and you. We're going to need you."

She turned on Jaim, snarling. "I can't sit here and watch him die!"

Jaim jumped back. "I wasn't suggesting that you watch him die."

"Then what?"

Jaim looked over at the healer, working on the unconscious Dghall. "Dghall could beat the Dragon if he had his strength."

"As could I if I had his skills."

"Dghall said you had as much control of magic as he did, only in other areas. Could you use your magic to help the healer heal him?"

Alarista stared at Jaim. She wasn't a healer, and just healing Dghall wouldn't do her any good. Even healed, he would be drained of energy and incapable of besting the soul of a rested, powerful Dragon. But where the healer could make him well, she could give him strength. Her strength. The price she would pay . . .

She chose not to think about the price she would pay.

She asked the healer, "Namele, are you nearly finished?"

"I've done all I can he hasn't woken up yet, but now he's merely sleeping. A few days rest and he should be able to sit up again. He's very frail whatever happened nearly killed him."

"But he's healed."

Namele looked over at her, eyes wary. "As much as magic can heal him, yes. He's old, he's worn out, and simple healing can't fix that. He won't be able to do any more Dragon-fighting."

Alarista turned to Yanth and Jaim. In a low voice, she said, "Drag him over here. Then sit by me when I finish what I have to do, I'll need you to catch me. Finally and this is the most important thing when Dghall wakes, the very instant he wakes, show him Hasmal. Don't let him waste time on me. Tell him he has to stop the Dragon before he kills Hasmal."

Yanth said, "What do you plan on doing?"

"The only thing I can. He needs youth and strength to fight the Dragons. Im going to give him youth. And strength."

She heard the healer gasp. "You cant "

"Shut up. I can." She glared at Yanth. "Youll take care of this?"

He nodded. "I will."

They dragged Dghall to her, assisted by two guards and impeded by the protesting healer, and propped him across from her in a sitting position. Then, while the guards held him upright, Yanth moved to her left shoulder, and Jaim to her right. She heard Hasmal scream once, and she shuddered.

Hold on, Has, she thought. Hold on. Help is coming.

She summoned all her courage, and rested her hands on Dghalls shoulders. Then she lifted her chin, and stared toward the heavens where Vodor Imrish held his court, and in a loud, clear voice, she commanded:

*"From my strength,  
From my blood,  
From my flesh,  
From my life,  
I offer all that I am,  
All that I have,  
All that Dghall Draclas needs  
To make him whole.  
Take from me to give to him,  
Strength and blood,  
Flesh and life,  
Even unto my own death.  
I freely offer my gift,  
And in his name accept my offer.  
Vodor Imrish hear me."*

She did not draw her own blood, nor scrape her skin. She had no need of that. Their bodies touched hers strong and whole, Dghalls weak and worn. She would not limit her offering or mark off with a circle that which she would give and that which she would hold back. Whatever Vodor Imrish chose to take from her to give to Dghall, he could take.

She knew in offering that she might die that Dghall, so near death, might take from her more than she could give and survive. He might absorb her. But he knew what she did not, and he could win for them where she could not. If she died, she would do so fighting to destroy the Dragons and to save Hasmal, and that would be enough. If she died, her soul would go on, and she would some day find Hasmal again. And meanwhile, her Hasmal would live.

She felt the fire flow into her veins, Matrins magic stirred by the godtouch, and she knew that Vodor Imrish had heard her. She rejoiced for just an instant, for until that moment he had been deaf to all prayers and all entreaties. Then, as the fire filled her, it burned through her and emptied her. Her world grew dark and she heard a rushing in her ears. Her mouth grew dry, her body heavy, and a giant weight pressed down on her, making each breath a fight.

She knew she was falling, but could not stop herself. Her soul tugged at the moorings of her flesh, called by the wind of approaching death. She did not fight that wind, but at the last instant, when she was sure she would leave her body behind, she felt a surge of energy flow into her, binding her soul tightly to her cage of skin and bones. She was too weak to move too weak even to open her eyes but she lived, and knew she would live yet a little longer. Her last coherent thought was a prayer that Dghall had received from her enough to do what he needed; that Hasmal could hold on until he did it.

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