

Curse of the Black Heron

By Holly Lisle

Chapter 1

I remember the beginning of the end of my world clearly, but not for the reasons anyone would usually associate with remembering such a day. Early morning dragged me from my bed, and the herald from the capitol drew me out of Birdie's cool house into the town square of Blackwarren and into the already-sticky heat of the early summer day, where I stood beside my friend, Giraud dar Falcannes, and listened to the latest news from the city, shouted by a lovely young herald backed up by a contingent of cold-eyed enforcers.

"In this the Century of the Constellation Baragar the Hunter, in the year of Ten Firehawk and the season of Merroell, on the fifth day of the month of Tassetti, which We rename Varelle in our honor, We-Varelle dar Kothia Surdosti-declare that Salgestis Dargoman the Usurper has been cast down, and executed, and that We have lifted his head on a pike in Greffon's Great Square as proof and testament of Our intentions to all such usurpers." The herald sat astride her black horse, dressed all in royal red and empire blue, with a crest on her tabard that I'd never seen and a weighted scroll in her hands that gleamed at the edges with the sheen of real gold. She glared down at all of us who stood listening to her decree, daring us to dispute her.

I leaned over and whispered to Giraud, "Forgive me if I'm wrong, but wasn't Salgestis the rightful king? And isn't Varelle dar Kothia Surdosti the usurper?"

Giraud grinned at me. "Mmmm. Well, she was until she won," he whispered back, "but it would be awfully impolitic of us to

remember that now, wouldn't it? And possibly hard on our necks, Isbetta. Never forget that the winners get to call the losers anything they want."

The herald spelled out Varelle dar Kothia Surdosti's decrees to us—that she would be Empress, titled Gloriana Majeste of all the lands of Terosalle; that her capital city would be Greffon; that she would give pardon and favor to all who acknowledged her as Empress and would execute those who did not, and with them their every relation through ten generations; and so on, and so on. The herald's reading made for an impressive decree, but I must confess that discovering I had a new ruler in Greffon interested me less than discovering I owned a new sheep would have. The fact is, I was about to graduate to journeyman status and be admitted to the Weavers' Guild, and my foster mother would, upon my graduation, owe me a sheep as a gift—the first of what I hoped to turn into an impressive weaver's flock. The sheep was both symbol and material contributor to my future. Whereas in Blackwarren the doings of the High Court were so distant both in leagues and in their effects on our lives that they didn't even make for interesting gossip.

I rolled my eyes. "This going to make any difference for you and His Lordship?"

"Oh, sure. The—" Giraud made a face, "—the Gloriana Majeste is bound to want an increase in taxes to fill her empty war chests. And no doubt she'll want Da to ride to her county seat in Kingston Bylake with my brothers to declare undying allegiance. Shouldn't be much trouble for him otherwise, though. If he hadn't been in high stink with King Salgestis, we wouldn't have been in stuck here in Blackwarren in the first place, lording it over the peat bidders and the blackflies."

"You don't think you'll have to ride to Kingston Bylake, too?"

“Nah. I’m third tit, Izza. With Storrin and Baylar ahead of me in succession, I don’t even get invited to the dances in Straje.”

“And we both know how you love to dance.”

Giraud snickered. “I won’t complain about my place in life. I’m as happy as I’m going to be, living in Blackwarren. And maybe with Varelle on the throne Da will win a place of favor and we’ll be able to move closer to the capital and get a bit of culture from time to time.”

I recall finding that possibility unlikely. “You think she’ll grant your father new lands? But he didn’t support her.”

Giraud saw it as less of a problem, but then, he was always much more the optimist than I. Being lord’s son instead of poor foster-daughter to a peat crofter will have that effect on your outlook on life. Giraud said, “He didn’t support Salgestis, either. He wasn’t crazy. From one day to the next you couldn’t tell who would win their fight, or if both of them would lose and the damned Liedans would come sweeping down from the north by land and sea and annex us; and Blackwarren’s so far from everything Da didn’t need to make any passionate declarations of loyalty. Nobody even remembers we’re up here, most times. He just kept his head low and kept it on his shoulders that way.”

The herald had finished reading the new Empress’s decree, and sat rolling her scroll, preparatory to moving on to the next town or considering our position relative to the rest of civilization, perhaps just heading home. I said, “That’s it, then. The news of the world beyond comes and goes, and here in Blackwarren, nothing changes. Nothing at all.”

Giraud rested his hand on my shoulder as we turned to head to my craft-master’s shop. “That isn’t true for you, Izza.”

I had to smile. Giraud understood my reasons for anticipating

my release from Birdie's care, and was friend enough to be excited with me. "You're right," I agreed. "Finally, change comes."

"How many more days?"

I closed my eyes and pretended to count, but actually the number of days I had left in my apprenticeship might as well have been carved straight through my flesh into bone, I knew it so well. "Nineteen," I said.

Giraud laughed. "One for every year you've lived. How perfect."

"I still have two years as journeyman weaver after that, before I can become a master and set up my own shop. It isn't as if I can leave Blackwarren right away."

"But no more Birdie, right?"

I nodded vehemently. That was, as far as I could see, the greatest advantage in achieving journeyman status. "Exactly right. No more Birdie. I've been asking around, and I've already found a place living with the Widow dar Nothellin. She'll give me bed and board in exchange for three pence a month, and one bolt of fine blue cloth winter and summer."

"That's less than Birdie's taking."

"Birdie takes everything I make, just because she can." The anger I felt at that fact was, for once, tempered with satisfaction. "But only for nineteen more days."

Giraud jumped onto the boardwalk that began where the cobblestone street became dirt and mud, and offered me his hand. I took it—I would have been rude to refuse, even though I was quite capable of swinging myself up onto the walk, and bounded upward. Giraud said, "I still don't know why the old bitch didn't send you off to Watchowl Bards' Keep to train as a bard. You've the voice, and I think a touch of the magic,

too.”

“You think so, do you?”

Giraud smiled, but his eyes were serious. “You’ve certainly enchanted me.”

I tried to laugh, but the old bitterness came through too clearly and I stopped myself. I forced a lightness that I didn’t feel and said, “But that’s the way with apprenticeships. Our fosters choose what we shall be, and leave us the quandary of becoming good at what they choose.” I pretended to shrug it off. “My parents wouldn’t have fostered me with Birdie if they hadn’t agreed with her that weaving would be the right path for me.”

I was not, after all, alone in complaining about my foster-mother, or about the hardness of my life. Every other weaver-apprentice who studied with Marda dar Ellai complained, too. Of chores in the evening, of poor meals, of hard beds. I was alone in other ways, though. I alone came to Blackwarren not from a smaller town but from the greatest city of them all, Greffon. I alone recalled a life that was not bounded by the rising and falling of the sun, that was described neither by the movements of sheep and cattle through the pastures nor by the growing and harvesting of crops, nor by the cutting and drying of peat. I recalled the life I’d led as daughter of the king’s own bard—I’d been a child with free run of court with friends up to and including the king’s youngest daughter. I’d met Salgestis on occasion. I’d sung for him once—some trippery song about what a wonderful king he was. I recall that he’d been charmed, for I’d written the dreadful bit of doggerel myself, and had gone on to tell him that someday I would be a bard like my father. Bard with a capital ‘B,’ not bard-little-b without the magic. And he’d clapped me on the shoulder and told me what a good bard I should be, too.

I was alone in other ways. Of all Blackwarren’s fosterlings,

only I never received a visit from my parents or an invitation to return home for the Long Holiday. I alone lived exclusively with my foster-mother the year round, never so much as receiving a letter or an Ammas Day gift from my true parents. My fellow apprentices had endless theories about this, all of them ugly and hateful to one degree or another. Either I was an embarrassing bastard child, or my parents were mad and had been locked away, or I had done something in the past that was so terrible my parents had banished me from their lives, or I was an orphan from nowhere taken in by my foster-mother and that I was, to boot, a dreadful liar who made up stories about Greffon and my life before in order to 'give myself airs'.

Giraud didn't believe any of the stories, and sympathized with my plight as a fellow outcast from a better life. He was old enough to remember when his father had been in favor at court, and to wish for the return of those days. For him, the Gloriana Majeste Varelle represented a possible door back to a better life.

Giraud had been considering my remark about my parents fostering me with Birdie. "I wonder," he said.

"As much as she hates me, I sometimes wonder too—but I can't say that I see much point in thinking about it. I'd rather be a bard, but my life has gone another way." I peeked in the window of the dar Felpas bakery as the rich, delicious scent of goldberry pie tickled my nose. "Oh, I wish she'd shut the window when she bakes those. I always want one," I said.

Giraud ducked inside and bounded back out again with two large berry tarts. "For us, because we are almost free," he said.

I gave him a quick squeeze—not much of one, for not even the third son of a lord could be seen hugging a common weaver's apprentice, no matter how reputedly lofty her birth. I munched the pie as I walked along, closing my eyes as an especially rich bit of crust and berries melted on my tongue. "Don't you

wish all of life was berry pies?" I asked.

"And warm, busy houses in big cities," he said, "with libraries everywhere, and colleges and fairs."

"And silk dresses and silver-stringed guitars and musicians on the street corners," I added.

"And I would be Lord Giraud in my own white-walled castle," he said.

"And I would be your chief bard, and wear gold chains around my waist and ride a black horse."

"And you would never have to look at another loom or shuttle," he said, grinning at me.

"And you would never have to open another history book."

Giraud chuckled and shook his head. "Maybe that wouldn't be such a good outcome after all. I like history considerably better than I like swords or politics."

"Lucky for you," I told him. I reached the door to Marda's shop and grinned up at him. "You'll be busy for months, rewriting all the records in your father's library so that they say 'the evil usurper Salgestis Dargoman,' rather than 'Our Illustrious Liege Salgestis III.'"

When he realized I was right and he began to contemplate the enormous task before him, Giraud's face fell. I laughed at him. Cruel of me, I know—but he was the only apprentice I knew who got to live at home and learn his work in his father's library, while sleeping in his own bed and having the comfort of knowing his father and brothers were nearby and that his master didn't dare beat him much, for fear of retaliation.

With such luck, he didn't deserve any sympathy over the amount of work he would have to do.

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And that was how it started. We forgot about our new Empress and went on with our lives. A week passed, in which I did the final work on my journeyman piece, a blanket that I wove in honor of my patron goddess Neithas, the goddess of both weavers and singers, as well as the goddess of knowledge, the goddess of handicrafts, and when all wasn't right with the world, the goddess of war. Very busy, she is, and encouraging to someone like me who has a hard time making myself finish anything. I was doing the blanket in subtle blues and greens around a central circle composed of interlocking gold rays and pale yellow diamonds, and all through the outer edge, I'd woven looms and chariots and cats well, Neithas is the goddess of beasts, too. Besides, I like cats.

The blanket was as complex as anything I'd ever tried, and both the overall design and the minor patterns that I worked into it required most of my time and all of my concentration. After all, the journeyman blanket was my chance to earn my way to adulthood and acceptance, and even if weaving was no path I would have chosen for myself, it was, nonetheless, an honorable path, and one blessed by my goddess.

Besides, I could sing while I worked, and that helped.

I barely saw Giraud the entire week I was finishing my blanket; as he'd predicted, his father and both his older brothers had to make the trip to Kingston Bylake to swear fealty, and he stayed behind to make sure Blackwarren's greathouse continued to run as it should. That job would have fallen to his mother, but the Lady dar Falcannes had died of the grippe in the winter past, and Lord dar Falcannes had not yet found her replacement. I knew from rumors among the other apprentices that he had taken a few young women to his bed, to test them for suitability, but no sheaves of wheat hung from the greathouse gates, so evidently he hadn't found one yet who was to his liking. Or perhaps he hadn't been to the liking of

the women he'd entertained.

I'd met the man frequently. He had cold eyes and a cruel mouth and a way of never meeting my eyes when I talked to him, and I thought, personally, that only a very desperate woman would take him as her husband.

The day I finished my blanket, I sat for the better part of a candlemark just staring at it. I realized for the first time that I was good at what I did. Truly good. Neithas had blessed my hands and given me a talent with them that was, if not equal to the voice she'd given me, at least good enough to earn me a fine living—even in a town bigger than Blackwarren.

I was proud enough of myself that I carried the blanket to Marda to show to her.

"So you're finished then," Marda said. She gave the blanket a cursory glance.

I nodded, my heart sinking. I never asked Marda for her opinion of something that I'd done, because her opinion was always, "Is that the best you can do?" But I couldn't help thinking that this time, surely, she would see that the lovely patterns and fine cloth I'd created were a reflection of her own skill as a teacher, and she'd be proud of me. So, like an idiot, I asked her, "What do you think?"

Marda glanced from the blanket to my face, then back to the blanket for a longer, harder look. When she looked at me again, her eyes had become as cold as a winter wind across the peat bogs—as cold and as bone-chilling.

"We'll discuss it. But not now."

I left it with her at the shop and trudged home, completely unable to imagine what she had found to hate about my work. I ate a silent meal with Birdie, climbed up to my mat in the little loft about the single room of her cottage, and tried to

sleep. My mind kept tossing me images of the blanket, and of Marda, and struggling to find some flaw that I'd overlooked in the work that would so disgust her that she would look at me the way she had.

No matter how long I lay there, or how much I tossed and turned trying to find a comfortable position on my mat, I couldn't sleep at all.

Which was just as well.

Finally in the full darkness of late night or possibly early morning, when the fire in the hearth below had guttered down to coals and ashes, as I lay staring up at the slats and thatching just above my head, I heard a soft scratching at the shutters below. It was so light it might have been a branch dragging against the wood in a light wind—except no trees grew anywhere near the window.

Next I heard Birdie moving to the door, something about her movements so surreptitious and stealthy that my gut knotted. Birdie's usual slow, clump-footed gait had been replaced by something light and quick and dangerous.

I heard whispers at the door. "Should we go outside?"

"No. She's asleep. Been asleep for a while. Both of you might as well come in."

I could not imagine why anyone would care whether I was awake or asleep, but I didn't have time to ponder the oddness of the question. Others followed after it, each stranger than the one before.

"Did you arrange everything with the guild?" Birdie asked.

"Of course." In the soft reply I recognized the voice of my craft-master, Marda. What could she be doing in Birdie's house at an hour which hinted that what she did, she wanted no one to know about?

"They've agreed not to wait until they pass judgment on the rest of the apprentices?"

"Why should they? With her, we have no worries of irate parents, and now we need not worry about interference from his lordship, either. We'll receive their judgment just after first bell in the morning." Marda laughed. The sound was as ugly and cruel as anything I'd ever heard.

"I got news back from my messenger," a masculine voice said. I didn't recognize this voice at all.

Birdie's "Did you?" gave me chills.

"Lord dar Falcannes is dead along with both of his older sons."

"And your own pending lordship?"

"Guaranteed by none other than the Empress herself," the stranger's voice assured her. "Her men will arrive in the morning and dispose of the last remnants of the dar Falcannes. When the heads of the household of dar Falcannes adorn pikes in the square, her duke will name me temporary governor, and I'll travel to Kingston Bylake to be knighted. Sir Aymar dar Ressti sounds so much better than just Aymar."

Now I knew who he was. I'd seen him from time to time, a clever, hawk-faced burgher who came into Marda's shop to buy bolts of cloth, and who had twice when I was alone suggested that if I came to his house and was 'nice' to him, he would be sure I had pretty dresses and silver jewelry, and that I wouldn't have to worry about weaving for a living. He'd frightened me, but I had no one I could tell about his attentions. So I'd said nothing.

I'd been right to fear him. He'd found a way to have Giraud's father and brothers killed. He intended to see Giraud dead as well. I had to get out of the house to tell him—

"As soon as the guild rejects Isbetta's journeyman status," Aymar said, "I want her delivered to the Wolfshead Inn."

I froze, and my thoughts of charging off to get Giraud came to a halt. The Wolfshead Inn?

"I thought you wanted her for yourself first," Birdie said.

Aymar's chuckle was cold and evil. "I intend to have her for myself first. But I don't want her to be seen at my house. And the little bitch refused me—let her know from the beginning what price she'll pay for her refusal. Tassien will keep her in a room until I can get to her—after I've finished with her, he can put her to work."

The only work for women at Tassien's inn was whoring.

"The whore's guild doesn't object?" Marda asked.

"The whore's guild is willing to pretend she doesn't exist, as long as she takes only the trade the guild doesn't want," Aymar said. "Tassien offered to buy her outright from me, but I decided I'd rather have a percentage of the money he gets from her. In return, I'll pay of you a gold crown every month in recognition of your status as her her foster-mothers." He chuckled. "For as long as she lasts, anyway; that will add up nicely for the two of you, won't it?"

"It will indeed," Birdie said.

Marda just laughed softly. "And to think I promised the Black Heron we'd kill her after we killed her father."

I jammed the side of my fist into my mouth to keep from screaming. My father was dead? And these were his killers? I'd always thought he'd returned to Greffon and the king.

For an instant, the darkness that welled up for the depths of my soul swallowed me. I didn't want to live. I didn't want to have to move. I thought, in just that brief, bitter instant,

that I would lie in the loft waiting for whatever came to me; that I would give in; that I wouldn't fight, because I couldn't win. But self-preservation pushed back despair.

Birdie's voice raised slightly from its previous cautious low tones. "I told you there was money in orphans."

"Yes," Aymar said, "but even you wanted to whore her out as soon as we got her, and think of the income you would have lost from her weaving in the meantime. And she never would have lasted a month whoring when you first got her. Now well, now she might survive a year. And we've been paid thrice for her miserable life—the Black Heron's money, and the weaving, and now this."

They were silent for a while. I lay in the darkness, wondering how I could get out of the house and flee before they could catch me. Wondering how I could save Giraud. Wondering how I could get even with them for killing my father

"I'm still surprised," Birdie said, and her voice was thoughtful, "that the Black Heron didn't have his people kill us when we couldn't find those pages her father hid."

"He still hopes we'll find them. And I think we will. I'm telling you, the bastard hid them in dar Falcannes house," Aymar said. "I'll start looking for them tomorrow. And when we find them we'll copy them. We'll sell the Heron the originals for the hundred pounds of gold he promised. Then we'll figure out how to profit from the copies."

"How do you know you'll even recognize them when you see them?" Marda asked him. "Dar Falcannes has lived in that place for seven years since the bard left it, and he hasn't found them."

"Maybe. Or maybe he has and he's been using them all this time. Or maybe the bard hid them in a book in the library, or buried them in a jar in the garden. They were just parchment

pages. They weren't anything fancy—I suspect they were copies the bard made from something else, since they looked new. I couldn't read them—they were in that script the bards use that only they know.”

“I don't understand why you didn't steal the pages when you had your hands on them.”

They fell silent again. Finally Aymar said, “There's an old saying—'Never steal from a live bard.' It's good advice.”

I thought, you shouldn't have stolen from a dead one either, Aymar—you're going to pay for it. But I certainly couldn't make him pay for it right then.

Both Marda and Aymar left at last, and I listened while Birdie climbed the ladder to my loft. I had my back to her, and I kept my breathing regular and slow, and my eyes closed—I focused on feeling relaxed, on being calm, on allowing my body to go limp. Meanwhile, I could feel her stare like a knife between my shoulder blades, and I had to fight the impulse to hold my breath. I wished her away, feeling as scared as I ever had in my life. She was a murderer, and she wanted to sell me to a whoremaster, and if I didn't get away she would.

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