

THE  
FIREBRAND  
LEGACY

*Free Sample Chapters*

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# THE FIREBRAND LEGACY

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# 1

## THE FREAK OF ESTEN

Carine Shoemaker never liked Festival. She traded her last few rimecks for a loaf of bread and tucked it into the wicker basket on her arm. A breeze stirred the hood of her cloak. It flitted through the strings of indigo pennants that hung across the marketplace for Festival. It shook ships at port and rang the bells at the top of the masts as if to announce that something was coming.

Something *was* coming.

Carine hugged the worn edges of her faded green cloak. Around her, stringed instruments twanged as men and faunfolk tuned their lyres and harps. The marketplace brimmed with extra stalls and throngs of buyers. The perfume of honey-almond sweetbread filled the air.

Unlike Carine, other Esteners skipped through the streets smiling. They braided their hair to mimic the scales of a dragon's tail. Unlike Carine, they splurged on toys and outfits for the great

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street dances that began tomorrow. They piled up their odds and ends in wishpiles, hoping that those normal objects would gain magical enchantments by week's end. Unlike Carine, they celebrated.

But Carine could not forget the truth. Festival was not a simple celebration. It was the time every year when the ash dragon Kavariel spewed his fire into the city. The streets filled with heavy black smoke as homes and people burned. Even those who escaped the dragon's fire still had to look out for his teeth.

Carine would not dance and sing until he arrived. She would not cheer for the beast. She refused to pay tribute.

At the city's edge, amid the whitewashed homes of South Esten near the castle, a limestone beacon spiraled up to the sky. The torch tower, Esten's most famous landmark, was built by menfolk, fauns, and centaurs hundreds of years ago to prove the kingdom's strength. But it was Navafort's threat, not its pride, the tower illustrated. Winding its way up to top, where Kavariel's flame from last year burned in its last hours, the builders had engraved a dragon. Kavariel's limestone jaws opened at the pedestal, as though he were breathing that flame.

For now, the flame meant that Carine was still safe from the beast that had killed her sister years

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ago. That dancing light meant she still had time to run home with the rations to feed her parents until Kavariel came and left. But as the strings played and Esteners haggled over treats, as children ran with indigo ribbons and sisters braided each other's hair, Carine glimpsed a change in the corner of her eye.

Far above the decorations and dancing, a dragon's statue opened its jaws to the torch.

The flame flickered and danced, as if perturbed by the wind, but before Carine could dash into a run, the flickering light snuffed out. Its black smoke ribbon curled, rose, and vanished.

Carine's heart stopped.

Any moment now the dragon Kavariel would appear as a growing black dot over the sea. At any moment it would roar over the marketplace. Its wings would whip open and its hind claws would pound onto the street and crush the cobblestone.

A woman with patriotic braids lifted her pointer finger. "Look!"

Carine pushed past her, frantically bumping against the Esteners who turned to see the torch. Like a fish squirming upstream, she squeezed through throngs of bejeweled South Esteners, who didn't budge for the North Esten girl in faded clothes.

An Estener whooped, and suddenly cheers

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clapped into the open air. A lute strummed. Music sprang up.

“The Ten Dragons Festival has begun!” they cried with such glee that Carine held back tears. Years ago, she and her older sister Louise had greeted these few days of the year with the same delighted shrills.

Carine pushed past them, her basket pressing into her arms and chest, wanting to shake every one of them and announce what they already knew: this dragon murdered—on schedule—every year.

He was nothing to celebrate.

As the marketplace gave way to a maze of haphazard brick houses crammed together with shared walls, Carine pulled her hood lower over her face and dodged overhanging laundry and pennants. She passed dragon-shaped door knockers, fragrant spices from upriver, and baskets with braided handles. Fiddlers played, and moments into Festival, dancers already surrounded them.

Carine broke into a sprint, the boots she’d made with her father clopped over the street. She didn’t care what the braided townsfolk thought when her hood flew off, and her long auburn hair billowed out.

“Hey, you!”

Carine’s neighbor stepped out from the brick

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wall. His siblings and friends followed, arms crossed and scowling. She reeled back, pulling the food close to her chest. Without her hood, she felt vulnerable, but to reach back now would only delay her. She ducked her head and plowed forward.

“Not so fast, shoemaker.”

The boy’s shoes pointed at her as he outstretched a grubby palm. These were people she hadn’t played with since she was five. Now, over eight years later, they stood between her and the only two family members she had left. Carine nudged past his arm onto her street. Her father’s shoemaking sign hung at the very end.

Her neighbors followed her.

A girl said, “You’re not the only one who lost someone during Festival, you know. You don’t see the rest of us cowering inside during the best part of the year.”

“Yeah,” sneered her brother. “And everyone else pays tribute to the dragon.”

Carine swallowed and kept walking. Her legs felt stiff. All she wanted was to be safe inside with her family.

A third one spoke up. “If Kavariel didn’t come to Esten every year, we wouldn’t have his enchanted flame to protect us. What do you think about that, shoemaker? We’d have no defense against the Heartless Ones. Doesn’t that mean

anything to you?”

Carine clenched her jaw. Everyone always used the Heartless Ones as an excuse. But just because Kavariel’s flame kept dark magicians out of Esten didn’t mean that the enormous sacrifices were worth it.

The girl yanked Carine’s arm. Carine spun in shock and pulled the basket to her chest.

“Tell your parents not to board up your house this year,” she demanded coldly.

Carine’s blood rose in her cheeks. She didn’t look any higher than the shoddily-made shoes the girl was wearing. Not only did her neighbors gossip about her family, but they avoided the shoe shop on their own street.

“No,” she said. The word was quiet and simple but enough.

Carine wrenched free from the girl’s grasp. She turned; they followed.

“We’ve all been talking about you,” the girl continued, keeping pace. Carine wished her father’s shop wasn’t at the end of the street. “You have to stop. Even the adults are saying this has gone on too long.”

“Yeah,” said her brother. “If you board up your house and Kavariel doesn’t get you, everyone else will.”

Carine’s face burned. Before she could stop

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herself, she turned to confront them. But she couldn't raise her gaze. Her heart pounded as she searched for words. This was the moment to stand up for her family. For her mother, who was her comfort and teacher. For Didda, who worked tirelessly to earn her meals and never went without a smile. Her parents were her world, and this was her chance to defend them.

“You can't barricade yourselves without food.”  
The grubby boy yanked the basket away.

Carine reached, hurtling for the food her family needed, but he and his friends dashed down the narrow alleyway under the same open sky that beckoned forth the beast.

## GLORY TO THE GREAT MARCELS

Carine's fingers balled into fists. The flame had already gone out, and she was mere feet from safety. But if she didn't get that food back, her family would starve this week. With a final glance at the shoemaker's sign that marked her home, Carine picked up her skirt and raced after the thieves.

Their footsteps clapped as they wound through the roads. Carine pushed away the overhanging laundry and leapt over the sales blankets. The lively street music grew louder and faded as she passed.

The thieves turned a corner.

"Stop!" If people weren't staring before, they were staring now. She was a raggedy Grunge dweller—not wearing Festival attire, not wearing the patriotic braid—frantically zig-zagging through the streets. "*Stop!*"

They ignored her. Carine skirted down an alleyway, hoping she could cut them off. When she

popped out, they nearly collided into her. Their eyes widened when they saw her, but as Carine stood panting, they fled giggling and laughing. To them, this was a game.

Carine grunted and rounded another corner after them. If she lost them, her family would have nothing. If they got away with the food, she and her parents would either starve inside or one of them would have to brave Festival. One of them would risk getting burnt up, just like Louise.

One of the trio glimpsed back. Carine was only a few feet behind. She stretched out her fingers. They grazed the wicker.

Trumpets interrupted the street music.

They turned another corner, and Carine ran face-first into the trio's backs. They halted in front of the river, where a crowd flocked around a line of royal carts that crossed the bridge into the Grunge.

The indigo flags embroidered with golden lines flapped in the evening wind. Knighted centaurs blew bugles to lead the procession as all eyes fell on the young man in the second cart: the eldest prince. His golden hair flowed in soft locks around his head, and his smile gleamed. It wasn't often that princes ventured into North Esten.

*"Prince Marc-e-e-e-l!"* Carine's neighbor shrieked, her voice piercing through cupped hands.

"Glory to the Great Marcells!" yelled the boy.

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Carine's vegetables and bread spilled over the cobblestone when the boy dropped the basket. Now that Prince Marcel was here, he'd lost interest in the torment.

In the next cart were the younger princes, fraternal twins about Carine's age. Prince Giles stood in the cart with his arms clasped behind him, nodding to acknowledge the people. Prince David sat back on the bench smiling broadly and waving in large, enthusiastic strokes.

Carine knelt, but not for the princes. With all the danger the royals allowed, even celebrated, Carine had no interest in paying homage. Instead, she gathered the food. Someone stepped on her hand by accident. Someone else squished the sweet peas. The crowd cheered and sang as the procession ran on.

Their mirth faded behind her as she dragged herself home, more grateful than ever for the people she would see there. Even though they faced darkness and silence for the next several days, a tiny home with love was better than a world without it.

## DARK TIMES

“Carine!” Mom yelled from the open doorway. She had long, unbraided hair and sparkling, nut-brown eyes like her daughter. When Carine reached the doorway, she wrapped her arms around her. Even though Mom spent all day inside their leather-infused home, she always smelled like fresh picked flowers.

“There you are! Thank the flames.” Didda appeared in the doorway with a hammer and nails in his hands. He had a small frame and a way of standing that made him look even smaller, but he was more loving and self-sacrificial than anyone Carine knew. His eyes sparkled with the full, understanding love between father and daughter. Just seeing his smile eased the heartache from earlier today.

She threw her arms around him too. “Come inside quick. The flame has gone out.”

Happy to be home, Carine closed the door

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behind her, locking the bolt so no one—or nothing—could come in. Carine and her family were all together—and safe.

The room was dim. While she had been buying vegetables and chasing thieves, Didda and Mom had been nailing boards over the windows. They wouldn't risk a single enchantment floating into their home. They also didn't want Festival-goers peering in like children peering into fishbowls. Bits of light streamed through cracks between the boards, just enough to see their way around.

Home was one room. The front half was the storefront where shoes, boots, and leather belts lined the shelves for sale. Carine had made some of them herself, and carved all the designs on the more elaborate shoes.

“What happened out there?” Didda asked. “Why were you late? I was minutes from looking for you.”

Carine pushed back her hair with the hand that held her drawstring purse. “It's not good. They're getting worse.”

Mom glanced to the door, as if she could see through it to the ones that played games outside. A worry line creased her forehead. “What happened?”

Carine sighed. “Let me put the food away.” She pulled aside the quilted blanket that divided the storefront from the table and Carine's bed. All she

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wanted now was to retreat with her family, to distract herself from the fears and dark memories that always struck this time of year.

“What happened?” Didda repeated. His fists rested on the tabletop as Carine pulled the bread from the basket and set it on a cloth.

“The neighbors have been talking. They said that if the dragon doesn’t punish us for not paying tribute, then they will.” She stared down at her fingers. They still had dirt on them from picking up the bread.

Didda poked the table. “Now you listen to me. Don’t trouble yourself over them for one second. Do you understand?” His eyes blazed. “I will not let anyone hurt you. I will not.”

Carine shuddered inside, knowing the reason his voice trembled. Didda would do anything in his power to protect his daughter. She was the only one he had left.

Mom squeezed Carine’s arms. Her eyes sparkled with sympathy. “Don’t be afraid,” she said. “We have each other.”

That night, as the light faded in the cracks between the boards, Carine sat on her bed and thought. Mom had said not to be afraid because they had each other. But losing each other was exactly what Carine feared.

Outside, the festivities clamored on, the noises

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trickling into the shop. A girl laughed, and a few men were singing battle hymns down the road.

When Carine and her sister Louise had traipsed through town, Festival had been magical in a good way. It was like a dream: candy, music, activity. Their older cousins used to show them the best spots in Esten to hear faun music and the best views to see King Marcel when he announced the Ten Dragons Festival had begun.

Carine was four the last time she experienced Festival that way; Louise was six.

Her parents told her later, when she was older, that her cousins and aunts were supposed to have been watching Louise. They told Mom that they spotted Louise just as the beast's claws crashed onto the street. She was too far away for them to save her. When the dragon flew off, they looked for her body, but all was ash. Carine and her parents never visited their extended family again.

Carine tucked herself under the blanket and tried to clear her mind. But thoughts hounded her. The more she tried to forget, the more she remembered. The main thing Carine remembered about Louise was her curls: black ringlets that danced when Louise laughed. And Louise had loved to laugh. Sometimes she felt guilty that she didn't remember more. Even the curls were a detail her parents had mentioned time and again, so

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sometimes Carine feared she was inventing memories.

Outside someone shouted, “Is that him?”

Carine froze. An image of yellow and orange flames flashed in her mind’s eye. She saw them filling the street outside, licking her window, creeping inside, engulfing her, turning her to ash like Louise.

“That’s a bird.” Someone else giggled.

Carine pressed her face into her pillow, too rattled to feel relief. After a moment, she crept up from bed and triple-checked the lock.

Dark and alone, no one could touch them. Dark and alone, they’d be safe.

## LOCK THE DOOR

Mom, Carine, and Didda laughed around the table playing cards. Didda told stories that his father had told him, complete with accents and voices. In the evenings, Carine and Mom took turns brushing each other's hair and creating wacky styles they would never wear in public. Mom hummed old tunes that Didda and Carine danced to in the shop. It was lovely.

But now something wasn't right.

It had been nine days. Not three, not four. Nine.

Every year when the flame went out, no one knew exactly when Kavariel would arrive. Sometimes he came the first day, sometimes the third or fourth. But Festival never lasted more than five days. Never.

The food had grown scant. The card games grew dreary. Carine and Didda had used up all their leather making new belts and carving designs.

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Carine had drawn as many pictures as she had carbon for, engraved as much as she could stand with dismal lighting. She had alphabetized the shoes three times, sorting them once by style, once by size, and once by value.

Their throats were parched and their words were few. Their bellies ached. Carine spent her afternoons by the boarded windows listening to the waning, confused celebration of the Festival-goers and the numbing rhythm of splattering rain. Sleep was the only respite...

Carine shot up from her covers. Afternoon light filtered into the dark room; so many days in hiding was ruining her family's sleep schedule. She shoved the thin blankets off her nightgown and strode to her parents' mattress on the floor.

"Didda?" she said in the dimness. "Mom?"

Didda mumbled from his pillow. Carine squatted, close enough to discern Didda's silhouette. Her father had been so patient the last few days, saying he was full when she knew he wasn't just so Carine could eat another bite.

Mom hadn't been so patient, but in some ways Mom's voiced complaints motivated Carine. She rounded the mattress to check on Mom, but nobody was there.

"Mom?"

Carine swept away the quilt that divided the

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room. Her shins ran into the bench at the table.

“Mom?”

No answer.

Didda sat up sleepily, and his worry joined hers as he batted the empty sheets next to him.

“She’s not here,” said Carine, voice rising. “Mom? Are you here?”

“I didn’t even feel her get up,” Didda said.

Carine ran to the door. It wasn’t bolted as it had been when Carine went to sleep.

“She’s been parched. We all have,” Didda said, standing and wiping his eyes. “She probably went for water and food.”

“Alone? At a time like this? Without telling either of us?”

“Calm down, Carine. I’m worried too.”

“Calm down?” Carine hadn’t bothered to change her clothes or even wear her surcoat, since they wouldn’t be outside. One old sock pooled below her ankle. Her stomach growled. “The whole point of us shutting ourselves in like this is so we’ll be together. What if the dragon flies over?”

Didda wrapped his scrawny arms around her, but it didn’t help. Mom was missing out there. Carine hadn’t even had a chance to say good-bye.

Part of Carine wanted to put on her cloak and find her mother, to pull her back home to safety. But another part, a stronger part, knew that going

outside would just double their family's risk.

“Do you hear that?” Carine said. She pressed her ear against the crack between the door and its frame. Outside, footsteps clapped over the cobblestone.

“It's me,” Mom's voice said. She banged the door. “Let me in...*Let me in!*”

Carine opened it. “What were you thinking, Mom?”

Mom stumbled in and slapped the door shut, dropping a nearly-empty water bucket and a bunch of carrots on the floor.

She fell onto her knees, panting. Her long, graying hair hid her face as she said, “Lock the door. Lock it. Lock it.”

5

MARKED

Carine promptly obeyed. No sooner did the door latch than Mom pulled her away.

“Hide,” Mom said. “We have to hide.”

A million questions whirred through Carine’s mind, but she couldn’t find any words. Mom’s eyes were wide, and her shoulders rose and sank so quickly that she could pass out.

“We’re not the only ones in hiding now,” Mom gasped.

“What?”

“The streets are empty. Everyone’s locked inside. There’s no one out. Did either of you notice when the music stopped outside?”

Coming to think of it, the celebrations had waned over the last several days, and the rain had skirted the celebrants off the streets. But Carine hadn’t heard a peep from the festivities since yesterday. Her heart raced.

“No one’s outside. Even these vegetables...they were laying on the table unattended, free for the taking. I just took something and hurried back.”

“Why? Why are they locked in?” Carine said.

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“Maybe they finally came to their senses,” Didda suggested.

But in the pit of her stomach she knew it was something worse. There was only one kind of person that would be powerful enough to empty the streets of its people, especially during the Ten Dragons Festival.

Only the Heartless Ones had enough power to frighten Esten. If their dark magic wasn't terrible enough, the way they acquired their power made them loathsome. They started out as normal folk—humans, fauns, centaurs, gnolls. To gain their power, they sought out the snow dragon Luzhiv, cut out their own hearts, and fed them to him. In exchange, the snow dragon preserved their heartless lives and let them borrow his power.

Carine trembled. As much as she hated the dragon Kavariel, the beast did bring their kingdom one thing they needed: the enchanted flame. Only Kavariel's flame could splice the link between the Heartless Ones and Luzhiv. When runners delivered tongues of the flame to the ten towers that surrounded Navafort—including its capital city Esten—those blinking lights meant protection from the Heartless Ones.

These nine days were the longest Navafort had ever gone without the flame. Now, Kavariel's flame wasn't here to stop them. For the first time, the

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Heartless Ones could enter Navafort without a threat.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Didda said. “The Heartless Ones know that as soon as Kavariel relights the flames they’ll die.”

Mom wiped her face. “I thought the same thing, but then I realized that maybe everyone knows something that we don’t. And then...I saw blood. Down the street at the northwest square. A lot of it. And as I ran back, someone followed me. I tried to run a long way, so he couldn’t track me, but...I don’t know if I lost him.” Her voice broke, and Didda wrapped his arm around Mom’s shoulder.

“Someone followed you here?” Carine said, voice rising in horror. “Here? Can’t we do something?”

“That’s what I’m telling you,” Mom said. “Hide.”

Her family owned little, meaning that there wasn’t enough furniture to conceal them.

“There’s no place to hide,” Carine said. “We’ll block the door, in case he tries to come in.”

Mom nodded, wiping her eyes.

Carine bent over the tree stump that Didda sat on when he carved. Her fingers bent into the bark. It scraped the floor as she dragged it to the door. “Help me with the benches.”

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Didda followed her to the table by the hearth. They each grabbed an end of the first bench and carried it to the door. Carine's arms shook as she carried it.

It thudded as they dropped it to block the doorway.

“Quietly!” Mom hissed. She bent her ear to the crack of the door frame. “There was something else too.”

Carine wiped sweat from her forehead and searched the room for anything else remotely heavy. She didn't want to hear this. She didn't want to hear any other detail that threatened the only thing she had ever wanted. Carine had already lost her sister. It wasn't too much to ask that her family and little shoe shop stay safe. It may be dark and lonely, but at least home was always safe.

Mom's voice was little more than a whisper. “There was a sign carved into some of the front doors. It was never there before...a heart. But it did not speak of romance. It was almost...anatomical.”

Didda froze, but Carine was determined to protect the door. She grabbed the long end of the table and pulled. It grated against the floorboards. Her back ached, but she pulled anyway, batting the quilt away as she tried to turn the table to the door.

Carine had always told herself that the dragon was a greater threat than the Heartless Ones. After

all, the Heartless Ones hadn't entered Navafort for two hundred years. Carine had been telling herself for days that those sorcerers would not think to check Navafort's borders after all this time. The Heartless Ones wouldn't like to come this far south. They preferred the colder climates of other kingdoms, like Fletchkey and Wyre. They wouldn't risk dying when Kavariel delivered the flame.

But, like Kavariel, the Heartless Ones were unpredictable. The Heartless Ones weren't a strategic army, but renegades whose motives and goals were known only to themselves.

"I really think I lost him," Mom repeated, threading herself out from behind the pile against the door. "I'm sure he wasn't a Heartless One. Besides, I don't think he followed me home. I really think I lost him."

Didda hugged Mom. A bead of sweat trickled down Carine's forehead. She pulled the table all the way to the door as Didda said, "Don't worry. He probably wasn't a...he probably wasn't anything to worry about. Probably just a land-hungry soldier from Padliot, come to take back the terrain he believes to be theirs. It's a good thing you ran."

Mom smiled, and Carine dodged around the table to push it the rest of the way. She held back tears. This was their safe house. She was supposed to be safe.

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“Oh, sweet Carine,” Mom said, pulling her into a hug. “Don’t worry. I’m sure I was just seeing things. Let me get some water. I think I’m just dehy—”

A fist slammed into the front door. Carine jumped and Mom shrieked. Didda trembled.

All at once, every fear culminated in one grating sound. The three stood amid the furniture, but on the other side of the board that was the door, metal scraped wood.

A practiced, unwavering note emitted as a blade etched one, two, three, four slow strokes. A shadow flickered through the razor thin cracks between the door’s vertical wooden beams.

They were being marked.

No one dared to speak.

They were holding onto each other. Carine’s arms wrapped around both her parents’ waists as their arms fell over her shoulders. No one dared to speak. Their hug and someone’s pounding heartbeat was both comforting in their solidarity and frightening in their collective helplessness.

The etching stopped.

Didda emitted a sigh of relief, but Carine watched the door. She had her eye on the lock.

The bolt was in place. She had just set it. But now, in the silence of five slow heartbeats, the bolt moved out of place. The door unlocked.

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