

Chapter 1 – The Stranger in the Shadows

The torches lining the great hall burned low, their flames bending as though cowed by the weight of silence. Selene sat at the edge of the dais, back straight, hands folded neatly in her lap as her father's voice rolled over the assembled nobles like the tide.

“...and so the decree stands. Any found venturing beyond the northern forest will answer not only to me, but to the laws that bind this kingdom.”

A murmur rose, soft and fearful, as though the mere mention of the forest had drawn a chill through the air. Selene knew better than to let her gaze drift toward the darkened windows, but she felt the pull all the same. The forest was forbidden, its shadows thick with tales of monsters and cursed souls, yet her dreams carried her there night after night.

She was not cursed. She told herself this often. But when she closed her eyes, she sometimes saw fire coiling in her palms—fire that was not born of torches or hearths, but of her.

She could never let her father know.

“...Selene,” King Alaric's voice cut through her thoughts.

She blinked, finding his gaze fixed on her. His crown glinted beneath the firelight, cold as the steel in his eyes. “Do you understand why these laws exist?”

“Yes, Father,” she said softly, lowering her eyes to the marble floor.

He studied her for a long, silent beat before continuing his speech to the court.

Selene's chest tightened. She had lived her entire life beneath the scrutiny of those eyes—eyes that demanded obedience, perfection, silence. She had never once given him reason to doubt her loyalty. And yet, he watched her as though expecting betrayal.

When the council was finally dismissed, Selene slipped from the hall into the moonlit corridors. Her slippers whispered against the stone, and with every step, the weight of the crown above her pressed heavier.

She longed for air. For freedom. For something more than marble walls and silken lies.

That was when she felt it: a presence.

A flicker of heat brushed the back of her neck. She turned sharply, heart racing.

A figure stood at the far end of the corridor, half-hidden in shadow. A cloak draped his broad shoulders, hood drawn low. But the torchlight caught his eyes—an unnatural blue, storm-bright and burning.

Selene froze.

He did not move closer, nor speak. Yet she felt as though every secret she carried—every spark she fought to hide—was laid bare beneath his gaze.

And then, with the faintest curl of smoke trailing from his hand, he was gone.

Selene's pulse thundered. Whoever he was, she knew two things with bone-deep certainty: he was not supposed to be here.

And he would change everything.

Chapter 2 – Whispers in the Forest

The forest was forbidden. And yet, Selene's feet carried her there as though her body remembered a truth her mind refused to accept.

The moon hung low, veiled by drifting clouds. Branches clawed at her cloak, roots snatched at her slippers, but she pressed deeper, heart pounding with equal parts fear and exhilaration. The air was heavy, rich with earth and something sharper—something like smoke.

Every tale she had ever been told of these woods filled her head: of cursed beasts with eyes like lanterns, of spirits that lured wanderers into endless night. Still she went on, drawn by a thread she could not see.

Then she felt it again—that heat.

The forest seemed to hold its breath. Selene's hand curled around the dagger at her waist, though she had little idea how to wield it.

“Careful,” a voice murmured from the dark.

She spun. He was there—the cloaked stranger from the palace. His hood was pushed back now, revealing hair the color of molten bronze, eyes like stormlight cutting through shadow.

Her breath caught. He was young—no more than a handful of years older than she. But there was something in the set of his jaw, in the way the firelight clung to his skin, that spoke of a life lived far from silken halls.

“You should not be here,” Selene whispered, though whether she meant him or herself, she did not know.

A faint smile ghosted across his lips. “Nor should you, princess.”

Her stomach lurched. “You know who I am.”

“Everyone in Arvale knows the king’s jewel,” he said, though his tone was not reverent but mocking. His gaze flicked over her, sharp and assessing. “But they do not know what you are.”

Selene’s blood ran cold. “What I... am?”

His hand lifted. Flame bloomed in his palm, golden and alive, casting wild shadows across the trees.

Selene staggered back, eyes wide. “You—”

“So do you.”

Her throat closed. She wanted to deny it, to spit that he was mad. But her hands betrayed her. Heat flickered beneath her skin, aching to answer his call.

“No,” she whispered. “I’m not—”

“Cursed?” His smile was bitter. “That is what they will call you. But we know better, don’t we?”

The flame in his hand died as swiftly as it had come. He stepped closer, and though every instinct screamed at Selene to run, her feet rooted to the earth.

“My name is Kael,” he said. “And whether you wish it or not, our fates are bound.”

Selene’s heart hammered so violently she thought it might shatter her ribs.

For the first time in her life, she was not alone in her fire.

But what terrified her most was how right it felt.

Chapter 3 – The Outsider Returns

The day Kael returned to Arvale, the city trembled without knowing why.

The bells had not rung, no banners flew, yet whispers crawled through the markets and up the marble steps of the palace. People said the northern forest stirred that morning. Flames had been seen dancing against the dawn.

Selene knew better than to listen, but her heart leapt anyway.

She sat at the high table that evening, hands folded perfectly, a smile painted on her lips as nobles preened and schemed around her. The masquerade of duty. The endless dance of politics.

And then the doors opened.

He strode in as though the hall belonged to him—broad-shouldered, dark cloak thrown carelessly across his back, eyes sharp as lightning cutting through storm.

Kael.

Selene's blood turned to fire. He should not be here. He should not have dared.

“Who is this?” her father thundered from the dais.

Kael bowed, but there was mockery in the angle of it. “A wanderer, seeking audience with the king.”

A ripple of unease swept through the court. Nobles shifted in their seats, whispers darted like knives. No wanderer carried himself like this. No wanderer dared look the king in the eye.

Selene kept her face still, but inside her chest, her heart beat like war drums.

Their eyes met across the hall. Just a heartbeat. Just enough to ignite the world.

She knew then that nothing would be the same.

Chapter 4 – A Dangerous Bargain

The throne room smelled of iron and incense.

Kael stood before the dais, chains heavy on his wrists. Selene had not seen them bind him, but here he was, shackled like a criminal before her father.

King Alaric's voice boomed. "You trespass in my kingdom, flaunt my laws, and insult my court with your insolence. Speak your last words, boy."

Kael's smile was slow, dangerous. "My words are not for you."

Gasps rippled. Selene's throat closed.

Her father's face darkened, but before his wrath could fall, Kael's gaze snapped to her. "You feel it, don't you? The fire that won't be caged. You're not alone, princess. You never were."

The court erupted into chaos. Voices clashed—accusations, fear, disbelief.

Selene's pulse roared. He should not have said it. He should not have named her.

"Enough!" her father bellowed, rising to his feet. "Take him to the dungeons. At dawn, he burns."

The guards moved, but Kael's voice cut through like steel. "You burn me, and you burn her too. For the same fire runs in our veins."

Selene's world shattered.

Every gaze turned to her. The king's fury, the nobles' horror, the guards' suspicion.

Her secret had been a noose around her neck for years. And with a single sentence, Kael had tightened it.

That night, Selene went to the dungeons. The corridors stank of damp stone and rusted chains. She found Kael leaning against the bars, bruised but grinning.

"You're mad," she hissed. "You've doomed us both."

"No," he said softly. "I've freed you. Now you can choose."

"Choose what?"

His gaze burned. "To keep playing their game—or to set the board on fire."

Chapter 5 – Lessons in Fire

The caves beneath the forest hummed with ancient magic.

Kael's people had carved the chambers into the stone, their walls blackened with soot, the air thick with the memory of flame. Here, far from the eyes of the court, Selene learned what it meant to let the fire live.

At first, it was chaos. Sparks burst uncontrolled from her palms, scorching the walls, burning her skin. Every failure echoed her father's voice in her head: cursed, dangerous, monstrous.

But Kael was patient.

"Again," he would say, steadying her wrist. "Don't fight it. Feel it."

When she wept with frustration, he did not mock her. When she screamed that she couldn't, he stood with her in the smoke until she tried again.

Little by little, the fire obeyed.

She learned to shape flame into threads that danced across her fingers. She learned to call it with a breath, to snuff it with a thought. She learned that the fire was not her enemy.

It was her.

And with every lesson, every stolen moment in the caves, the bond between her and Kael deepened.

Sometimes, when his hand lingered a heartbeat too long on hers, when his eyes softened with something unspoken, Selene's chest ached with a longing she could not name.

But longing was dangerous.

One night, as the flames painted gold across his face, Kael said, "The fire will demand a price, Selene. It always does. When the time comes, you must decide what you're willing to burn."

She met his gaze, her heart caught between fear and desire.

And for the first time, she wondered if she was more afraid of losing control—
or of giving herself to it completely.

Chapter 6 – Whispers of Treason

The palace had always been a nest of whispers, but now the voices grew louder.

Selene felt them in the halls, curling around her steps like smoke. Servants fell silent when she entered rooms. Nobles paused their conversations, eyes sliding toward her before darting away.

She pretended not to notice. Pretended to be the dutiful daughter, the jewel of Arvale. But inside, fear gnawed at her.

Kael's words in the dungeon still burned in her mind: *You're not alone.*

He had spoken the truth, but in doing so, he had cracked the walls she had built around herself. And once cracks appeared, everything else slipped through.

Lord Veynar, her father's spymaster, lingered in corners more than usual. His hawk-like eyes followed her at feasts, in council, even in the chapel where she prayed for clarity.

One evening, he approached her directly.

"You seem... distracted, my lady," he murmured, voice soft as a dagger sliding free.

"I am well," Selene replied, lifting her chin.

"Are you?" His smile was thin. "Whispers travel fast, princess. Whispers of fire. Of forbidden meetings in the night."

Her breath caught. "You dare—"

"I dare nothing," he interrupted smoothly. "I only listen. As does your father. And if he hears what I have heard..." His eyes glinted. "You will burn."

Selene forced herself not to flinch, not to let the fear show. But when she lay awake that night, the weight of Veynar's words pressed on her chest like stone.

She could not keep her secret much longer. And the court would not forgive.

Chapter 7 – The Relic's Secret

The relic pulsed beneath the ruins, a heartbeat carved from crystal and shadow.

Kael led her there under moonlight, his hand steady on hers as they descended into the earth. The air grew warmer with every step, until the cavern opened wide, filled with an eerie glow.

Selene gasped. At the center of the chamber stood a great shard of crystal, black as obsidian yet streaked with veins of firelight that pulsed in rhythm.

“The heart of the ancients,” Kael said. “The source of our fire.”

Selene approached slowly, heat prickling her skin. The relic hummed in her bones, in her blood. It *knew* her.

“What does it want?” she whispered.

Kael’s gaze was shadowed. “It wants what it has always wanted. To be claimed. But its power is not given freely. It must be taken. And taking it means sacrifice.”

Her hand hovered above the relic’s surface. Power thrummed against her palm, wild and hungry. She pulled back with a gasp.

Kael caught her wrist gently. “You’re stronger than you know. Stronger than even I.”

Their eyes locked, firelight dancing between them. For a moment, the world narrowed to his hand on her skin, his breath against hers, the unspoken promise burning in his gaze.

But before either could move, the relic flared. A pulse of light burst through the chamber, shaking the earth. Selene staggered, Kael pulling her back as shards of stone rained from the ceiling.

When the trembling stilled, the relic glowed brighter than before—its veins of fire reaching outward, searching.

Selene’s heart thundered. Whatever it was, it had awakened.

And it had chosen her.

Chapter 8 – Fire and Shadow

The first battle came at dawn.

Arvale’s guards poured into the forest, steel flashing, banners snapping in the wind. Kael’s people rose from the shadows, fire blooming in their hands.

Selene stood between worlds, cloak whipping around her, the relic’s call still burning in her blood.

She had never seen true war before. The clash of steel and flame, the screams, the smoke choking the air—it was nothing like the stories told in gilded halls.

“Stay back!” Kael shouted, flames roaring around his fists as he struck down a guard.

But Selene could not stay back.

A soldier lunged for her. Instinct screamed. Her hands ignited. Fire burst forth, swallowing him in light. He fell, weapon clattering to the dirt.

Selene froze. The world seemed to slow. The flames curled gently across her skin, not burning but *welcoming*.

She had killed a man.

But she had also saved herself.

Kael’s voice cut through the chaos. “This is who we are, Selene! Not cursed. Not broken. Alive!”

The words steadied her. She turned, fire answering her call, shaping itself into a shield that deflected an arrow, into a blade that cut through shadow.

The forest blazed with battle, but for the first time in her life, Selene was not afraid of her fire.

She was afraid of what it meant.

Because once the flames were loosed, there was no caging them again.

Chapter 9 – Betrayal in the Dark

The Midwinter Masque glittered with jewels, laughter, and lies.

Candles burned from golden chandeliers, music swelled from the gallery, and silk-clad nobles twirled in endless circles across the marble floor. Masks of silver, ivory, and gold hid faces, but nothing could hide the sharp scent of fear that lingered beneath the perfume.

Selene glided through the hall in a gown of midnight blue, her mask feathered and jeweled. To all eyes, she was the perfect princess—graceful, untouchable, obedient. But inside, fire churned in her chest, restless, hungry.

She felt him before she saw him.

Kael moved through the masquerade like a storm wrapped in velvet. His mask was black, plain, his shoulders broad, his presence undeniable. Selene's pulse leapt. He did not belong here, yet somehow he commanded the room without speaking a word.

Their eyes met across the dancers. The world tilted. He brushed her hand once, fleeting, as he passed her in the dance—enough to set her blood alight.

“Not here,” he murmured, low enough that only she could hear.

But another gaze lingered on her too long.

Lord Veynar stood at the edge of the crowd, his mask a hawk's beak, his eyes sharp as talons. He did not dance, did not drink. He only watched.

Selene's stomach tightened.

When the music slowed, she slipped into the corridors, her heart pounding in her throat. She expected Kael to follow. Instead, Veynar emerged from the shadows, lips curling into a predator's smile.

“Lovely mask,” he said. “But I wonder what you're hiding beneath it.”

Selene's voice trembled. “Lord Veynar—”

“I know,” he whispered, stepping closer. “The fire. The boy. The treason in your blood. Do you think you can fool us all forever?”

Sparks flared at her fingertips before she could stop them. Veynar's eyes gleamed.

“Ah,” he breathed. “There it is. The truth.”

A hand slammed against the wall beside Veynar's throat. Kael stood there, fury radiating from him like heat.

"You speak one more word," Kael hissed, flame licking his palm, "and it will be your last."

Veynar's smile only widened. "Kill me, and you prove everything."

Kael's grip tightened. Selene grabbed his wrist, desperate. "No! Kael, please."

For a heartbeat, the air trembled with fire and choice. Then Kael released him, shoving the spymaster to the ground.

Veynar laughed as he stumbled away, his voice echoing down the corridor.

Selene's stomach sank. The masque would end in fire, not dance.

Her secret was no longer a secret.

Chapter 10 – The Cursed Crown

Dawn bled across Arvale in smoke and fire.

The relic's hum shook the stones of the palace, louder with each passing moment. The city's bells rang in alarm as soldiers clashed in the courtyards, flame against steel, shadow against crown.

Selene stood at the center of it all, torn between blood and fire.

Her father's voice bellowed from the throne room. "Selene!"

She turned. King Alaric strode toward her, sword gleaming, his crown blackened by soot. His eyes blazed with fury and something darker—fear.

"What have you done?" he roared.

Her throat ached. "Father—"

"You betrayed me!" His face twisted with rage. "I should have ended you as a babe, before the curse took root."

The words struck harder than any blade. All her life she had sought his love, his approval. And now, at the end, all he gave her was hatred.

Kael stood beside her, fire crackling in his hands. “He’ll never see you for what you are. Only what he fears.”

Alaric raised his sword. “Stand aside, girl. Or I’ll cut the curse from you myself.”

The relic pulsed above them, cracks splitting its surface, light spilling like molten fire.

Selene’s heart pounded. She could surrender. She could flee. Or—

She stepped forward, flames curling from her palms. Her voice shook but carried across the hall. “I am not cursed. I am chosen.”

The relic shattered.

Light exploded through the palace, fire and shadow roaring like a storm. Selene cried out as power surged through her, breaking, remaking, consuming.

When the blaze faded, she stood at the center of the ruins. Shards of the relic circled her like stars. Fire licked her skin, shadows cloaked her shoulders, yet she did not burn.

Kael’s eyes widened, awe and fear mingling. “Selene...”

Her father lay sprawled on the steps, his crown scorched black, his sword melted. He looked up at her, terror raw in his gaze.

“My daughter,” he rasped.

“No,” Selene said, her voice both flame and shadow. “Your queen.”

She turned toward the throne. The shards spun faster, crowning her with light and darkness both. With a single breath, she sat upon the scorched seat of power.

The hall fell silent.

The cursed crown had chosen its heir.

And the kingdom would never be the same.

About the Author

Sharon is a storyteller who weaves fantasy and romance into unforgettable journeys. *Cursed Hearts* is a tale born from love of magic, passion, and the fire we all carry within us.