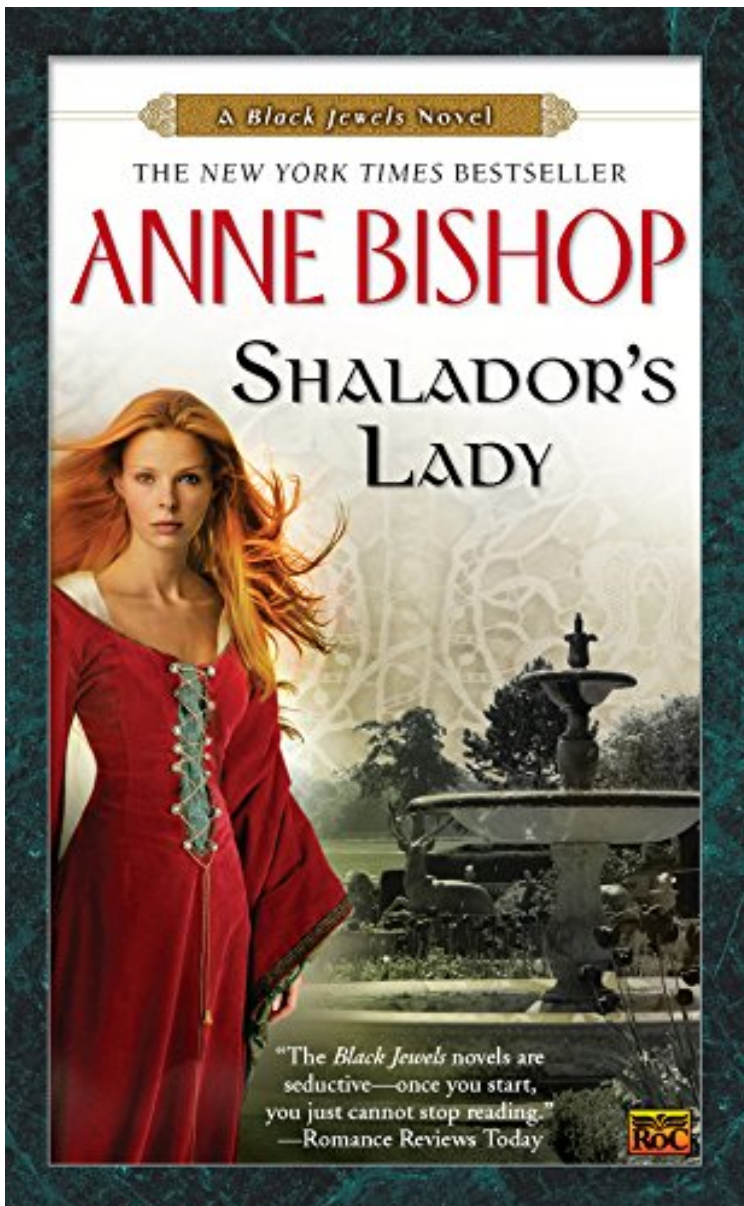


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Shalador's Lady



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurReturn to New York Times bestselling author Anne Bishops world of the Black Jewelswhere a Queen has emerged from the shadows to bring hope to an impoverished people For years the Shalador people suffered the cruelties of the corrupt Queens who ruled them, punishing those who dared show defiance, and forcing many more into hiding. And even though the refugees have found sanctuary in Dena Nehele, they have never been able to call it home. Now that Dena Nehele has been cleansed of tainted Blood, the Rose-Jeweled Queen, Lady Cassidy, knows that restoring the land will require all her heart and courage as she summons the untested power within her, a power capable of consuming her if she cannot

control it. And even if Lady Cassidy survives her trial by fire, other dangers await. For the Black Widows see visions within their tangled webs that something is coming that will change the land and Lady Cassidy forever... Extrait Terreille Ranon stepped out on the terrace behind the Grayhaven mansion, closed his dark eyes, and raised the wood flute to his lips. Then he hesitated while a lifetime of caution warred with the hope he felt because of Lady Cassidy, the Queen who now ruled the Territory of Dena Nehele. Because there was hope, and fledgling trust, Ranon took a breath and began to play a greeting to the suna song that had not been heard outside of the Shalador reserves for many, many years. Even there, it had not been played openly. His grandfather had taught him this song and every other song the Tradition Keepers had held on to since the Shalador people fled the ruins of their own Territory generations ago and settled in the southern part of Dena Nehele. The people had thrived there and put down roots, respecting the traditions of Dena Nehele but never forgetting their own and hoping, always hoping, that someday they would have a Territory of their own again. It had been good land once, and a good place to live when it had been ruled by the Gray-Jeweled Queens. Then Lia died, and Dena Nehele's decline began. Queens who were backed by Dorothea SaDiablo, Hayll's High Priestess, gained control within a couple of generations. Dorothea hated the people of Dena Nehele for holding out against her for so long, but she hated the Shalador people even more because of Jared, the Red-Jeweled Shalador Warlord who had been husband and Consort to Lia Grayhaven, the last Gray Lady to rule Dena Nehele. Because Dorothea hated Jared's people, her pet Queens ground away a little more of what was uniquely Shalador with each generation. The boundaries of the reserves where the Shaladorans had settled were whittled away until now they struggled to grow enough crops to feed themselves. The Shalador traditions were forbidden. The dances, the music, the stories all were taught in secret and at great risk. His paternal grandfather was a Tradition Keeper of music. A strong, quiet man, Yairen had been and still was a respected leader in Eyota, the village where Ranon had grown up. He was also a gifted musician who believed it was his duty to teach the young how to play the songs that had shaped the Shalador heart. The Province Queen who controlled that reserve broke Yairen's hands as punishment for teaching the forbidden and then broke them twice more. When they healed the last time, Yairen could barely hold a flute, much less play one. But he still taught his grandson, and he taught him well, despite the crippled hands. So this music had been a secret for most of Ranon's life. Even when he admitted to playing the flute, he never played within the hearing of anyone he couldn't trust and even then, he rarely played the songs of Shalador. Did the Queen he now served understand how much trust was required for him to stand here and play the music of his people? Probably not. Lady Cassidy had recognized his reluctance to play, but not even Shira, the Black Widow Healer who was his lover, understood how deeply fear and hope had twined in his heart these past few days as the flute's notes floated on the air and became a part of the world. Yes, he was afraid, but the hope of something new and better was the reason he stood here, in a place that had been a stronghold for the twisted Queens, and played music that had been forbidden. As one song followed another, Ranon let his heart soar with the notes and fill with a joyful peace. "How long do you have to spend serenading the little green things before you can have breakfast?" He opened his eyes and lowered the flute. The peace he'd felt a moment before vanished as Theran Grayhaven stepped out on the terrace. He and Theran didn't like each other. Never had. But he detected nothing in the question except polite interest. "A quarter of an hour." Ranon glanced at the hourglass hovering in the air next to him. Judging by how much sand was in the bottom of the glass, he'd played twice that long. "Gray says it will help the honey pear trees grow." "Does he really think they'll wilt and die if you don't stand out here playing music?" Theran asked as he studied the thirteen pots that were sheltered by the raised flower beds that formed the terrace wall. Ranon's heart gave a hard bump at the thought of any of the little honey pear trees dying, but he wouldn't admit to anyone how much the living symbols of the past meant to him. Jared had brought six honey pear trees to this land. One of them had been planted here at Grayhaven for Lia and had remained in the gardens long after it died as a mocking symbol of the Gray-Jeweled Queens who had once ruled. But that dead tree had hidden thirteen honey pears, carefully preserved. Lia had hidden them; Cassidy had found them as the first step to locating the Grayhaven treasure. Because of that, those little trees were a thread of shining hope that linked the past and the present. "Doesn't matter what Gray thinks," Ranon replied. "It is the Queen's pleasure that I play the flute each morning for the honey pears, so I play." He knew the phrasing was a mistake the moment he said it. "Well, we all play for the Queen's pleasure in one way or another, don't we?" Theran said. Then he glanced at Ranon and added with a touch of malice, "Better play faster or there won't even be porridge left by the time you get to the table, let alone meat and eggs." I guess we're not trying to get along anymore, Ranon thought. Since he made no secret of it, everyone in the court knew he hated porridge.

Which meant Theran had said that in order to jab at him. Why? Because they didn't like each other, and the effort to be civil rarely lasted for more than a few minutes at a time? Hell's fire. Grayhaven had been running hot and cold since Cassidy found the treasure and proved she was meant to rule here, but they were all committed to working together for the good of the land and the Queen. For the good of the land, anyway.

The other eleven men who made up the First Circle knew Theran didn't feel the same commitment to Cassidy that they felt. Serving in her court was part of the agreement Theran had made in order to bring a Kaeleer Queen to Dena Nehele. That didn't mean he wanted to serve her, despite his recent efforts to work with her instead of opposing her. "Tell you what," Theran added. "I'll save my share of the porridge for you." An edge of temper. A slash of heat in the air between them. And an unspoken invitation to spill some blood. "You're twenty-seven," Ranon said coldly. "I'm thirty. We're both too old to indulge in a pissing contest over porridge." Theran jerked back as if he'd been slapped. Then, snarling, he took a step forward. Using Craft to vanish the hourglass and flute, Ranon instinctively took a step to the side to give himself more room to maneuver. He wore an Opal Jewel; Theran wore Green. They were both Warlord Princes, aggressive predators born to stand on the killing fields. If they unleashed their psychic strength against each other, they could destroy the Grayhaven mansion and kill many of the people living here before anyone else knew there was danger. Even without using the power that made the Blood who and what they were, they could cause a lot of harm to each other with just muscle and temper. But if either of them was damaged so badly he couldn't serve, the court would break, and Ranon's hope for the Shalador people would break with it.

Remembering that, he backed away from the fight, indicating with a subtle shift of his body that Theran was the dominant male. Which was true, as far as the Jewels were concerned. But only as far as the Jewels were concerned. And that, too, Ranon conveyed with that subtle shift. Fury flashed in Theran's green eyes. Instead of accepting that Ranon had yielded, he took another step forward. Then . . . *Theran? Theran!* Saved by a Sceltie, Ranon thought as he watched Theran's hasty retreat into the mansion moments before the small brown-and-white dog bounded up the terrace's steps. "Good morning, Lady Vae," Ranon said with more courtesy than was required. The little bitch growled at him. Glancing at the Purple Dusk Jewel half hidden in her fur, Ranon offered no challenge. Vae was kindred the name given to the Blood who were not human and he'd seen her pull down a full-grown man in a fight. His caste outranked hers, since she was only a witch, and his Jewels outranked hers. On the other hand, she had speed, strong jaws, and sharp teeth. *You are not usually so foolish as other human males, so I will not nip you this time,* Vae said. "Thank you, Lady. I appreciate that." He also appreciated the implied threat that the next offense would earn him more than a nip. Vae trotted into the mansion, no doubt intending to administer her own brand of justice on the other foolish male. Ranon sighed. He'd come close to spoiling something that was as delicate as the honey pear seedlings growing in their pots. Give her the best you have, Ranon, the Shalador Queens had told him when they left yesterday evening. Show her that Shalador's heart and honor are worthy of such a Queen. Cassidy was a Rose-Jeweled Queen from Dharo. A tall, gawky woman with red hair and freckles, she was nothing like the image of the beautiful, powerful Queen that Theran had painted when he'd told the surviving Warlord Princes about his plan to save Dena Nehele. But when Ranon saw her that first day, he had felt the bond between Warlord Prince and Queen grab hold of his heart and gut, had felt the rightness of handing over his life to her will. In the few weeks since her arrival, she had shown herself worthy of that trust, and in the wake of all she had done in the past week fighting against a Warlord and his two grown sons to defend a landen family, as well as discovering the treasure that had been hidden on the Grayhaven estate even the Warlord Princes who had been disappointed when they had first seen her were reassessing the Queen behind the long, plain face. He didn't like Theran. He never would. But because he was grateful for Cassidy's presence and because he knew how he would have felt if he'd been required to serve a Queen he didn't believe in he would do what he could to keep peace between himself and Theran. And to bring back a little of the peace that had been spoiled, he called in his flute and played a while longer. Theran paused in the dining room doorway and took a moment to watch the people around the table. Despite their commitment to serve, the men who made up the First Circle of Cassidy's court had been wary of her. They had seen too much brutality done at the command of the twisted Queens who had ruled here. And no matter what they said, he knew they had been disappointed in their Queen's lack of beauty and power. Then Cassidy found the treasure that had been hidden by Lia and Thera, the Black Widow who had been Lia's closest friend. Not only did that discovery restore the Grayhaven family's personal wealth, it had uncovered journals and portraits that gave him and the other men in the First Circle a glimpse of the past that had helped to shape them because the people in those portraits had known what it meant to have honor. And Cassidy, by her actions, had

shown herself to be a Queen of the same caliber as Lia. Because of those things, he had made the choice to be Cassidy's First Escort in more than name, to serve her as if he felt the bond that the rest of the First Circle felt. But he didn't feel that bond, and despite his best intentions, serving her scraped at him. He was grateful for what she had accomplished so far, but he still believed that if Cassidy could do this much, the kind of Queen he had wanted for Dena Nehele could do so much more. The Blood who saw Cassidy had to get past that plain face and Rose Jewel in order to consider if she had anything to offer the land or the people and most of the Blood would be disappointed enough not to bother. Her contract to rule Dena Nehele is only for a year, Theran thought as he walked over to the table and took a seat. I can put up with serving her for a year. And it gives me time to find the right Queen for Dena Nehele. The right Queen wouldn't stick a Shalador Warlord Prince in his face every damn day. His only excuse for his behavior this morning was that Ranon's presence scraped at him even more than Cassidy's. He'd spent his whole life being Grayhaven, the last descendant of the Gray Queens' bloodline and the man destined to become the male leader the Warlord Prince the other men would follow. Until he brought Cassidy to Dena Nehele and she formed her court, that was exactly who he had been. Now people looked at the dark hair and golden skin that proclaimed Ranon's heritage. Then they looked at him, and instead of seeing Grayhaven, they saw Shalador. Worse than that, when men saw him with other members of the First Circle, they responded to him as a leader, but not as the leader. They acted like the Grayhaven name no longer meant as much now that Cassidy was here. Feeling spiteful and pissed off at everyone, he started to help himself to a double serving of steak, eggs, and potatoes taking Ranon's share as well as his own but as he stabbed the second piece of steak, Cassidy held out a clean plate and smiled at him. Noticing how sharply the other men around the table were watching him, he had no choice but to give her half of everything. When she set the plate in front of herself and didn't eat, resentment bubbled up. If she hadn't wanted the food, why had she prevented him from having it? At least Ranon is still stuck with the porridge. Then Theran glanced at his cousin Gray and remembered another reason to try to get along with Cassidy. Gray had been damaged in body and mind by the Queen who had captured and tortured him when he was fifteen. Now, twelve years later, Gray was finally changing emotionally and mentally from boy to man. A boy couldn't be Cassidy's lover, and that desire, that need was the force driving Gray's transformation. The proof of that was a simple thing: When they had first come back to Grayhaven, Gray had been too afraid of being inside the mansion to eat with them. Now he was here, sitting beside Cassidy, talking about . . . "What?" Theran almost dropped the coffee pot. "We're doing what?" "Going to the Shalador reserves," Cassidy replied calmly. "The Shalador Queens invited me. They want me to see the land their people are subsisting on, want me to see the truth of their concerns." "It's not safe," Theran said. It had been his automatic response to all of Cassidy's attempts to get out among the people, but this time he really was concerned about her safety and not what people would think about the Queen who now ruled them. He poured his coffee and began to eat because he needed to fill his belly. "Then it's up to Talon as Master of the Guard and Ranon as his second-in-command to make it safe," Cassidy said. "If we were going to the southern or western reserves, I would agree with Theran," Shira said. "They border other Territories, and the people there are as desperate as we are when it comes to repairing their lives and land." "What are you concerned about?" Cassidy asked Shira. "That they'll try to abduct me?" "Yes." Silence around the table. A sharpening of psychic scents as the Warlord Princes who served in the First Circle put an edge on tempers that were always well-honed. "You underestimate your value, Lady," Shira said. "You don't know how much a good Queen is worth in Terreille. Especially now." "An abducted Queen isn't worth anything," Cassidy countered. "You can't force her to rule." "But abducting a Queen could start another war." Cassidy leaned back, clearly startled by that possibility. "Ranon's home village is in the eastern reserve, far enough away from other Territory borders to be safe, and it's backed by the Tamanara Mountains," Shira said. "Protected on all sides." "But not protected from what's inside," Theran said. "The Shalador people have no reason to wish Lady Cassidy harm," Shira said coolly. "Prince Grayhaven, you can debate this all you want, but my decision is made," Cassidy said. "Five days from now, I'll be staying at the Shalador reserve. You, Powell, and Talon will discuss what needs to be done in order to accomplish that." She would have backed down a fortnight ago, Theran thought. She would have respected that he knew more about what Dena Nehele needed than she did and the other Warlord Princes who served her wouldn't have opposed him. A leader, but no longer the leader. He felt as if he'd lost something too elusive to name, but the sense of loss was real. "In that case, I'll get started on the plans," Theran said, pushing away from the table. He picked up his plate and coffee mug. "If you'll excuse me, I'll finish my breakfast while I work." He barely waited for her nod of dismissal, but he waited because Protocol required it. Then he walked out of the dining

room to finish his meal away from the woman he'd brought into his land. Cassidy might do some good during the year she was contracted to rule here. But letting the Shalador people think they were more significant than the rest of Dena Nehele wasn't going to help anyone. That was Ranon's doing. He never let anyone forget that the Shalador people had borne the brunt of the cruelty that Dorothea's Queens had heaped on the people of Dena Nehele. And Ranon never let him forget that if his family name had been anything but Grayhaven, Theran would have been living the same desperate life on one of the reserves as the rest of the Shalador people. Which implied his life had been easy, and that wasn't true. As the last of the Grayhaven line, he'd grown up in the rogue camps that were hidden in the Tamanara Mountains, living among men who would fight to the death and beyond rather than serve a Queen who wanted them to whore their code of honor. He'd been trained by Talon, a Sapphire-Jeweled Warlord Prince who had been demon-dead for almost three hundred years and who had been a friend to both Jared and Blaed, the Warlord Prince who had helped Jared elude Dorothea SaDiablo's guards and get Lia back to Dena Nehele. Not an easy life by any measurement, but other men had survived worse. Gray, for one. It was only for a year, he thought as he ducked into a room to finish his meal. Not that much could change. As he ate, he ignored the little whisper telling him that a great deal had changed already. The only thing left on the table was porridge. Ranon suppressed a sigh and took a seat beside Shira. That put him across from Cassidy, who had a full plate of steak, eggs, and fried potatoes. "Coffee?" Shira asked, holding up the pot. "Thanks." He scraped what was left of the porridge into a bowl. It was food, and he was thankful to have it. That didn't mean he had to like it. As he dug in, Gray turned to Cassidy and asked, "Will you be coming out to the garden to work?" "Not this morning," Cassidy replied. "I'm going with Shira to check on the landen girl who was injured." Ranon tensed. So did every other man who was still at the table. But no one challenged that statement, which was a welcome change since Theran was always yapping whenever Cassidy wanted to leave the estate. Archerr, an Opal-Jeweled Warlord Prince, said, "Prince Spere and I have escort duty this morning. If you think the First Circle should show a stronger presence, I can ask Prince Shaddo and Lord Cayle to stand as escorts too." Archerr kept his eyes on Cassidy, but Ranon knew the question was directed at him as Talon's second-in-command. He tipped his head in a subtle nod. Additional escorts weren't needed to ensure Cassidy's safety during this visit, but it didn't hurt to remind the townspeople that the Queen was served and protected by strong men. Then Gray said, "Perhaps Lady Vae would be willing to join you." "I don't think any of us could stop her," Cassidy said. Ranon snorted softly. Before Cassidy's arrival, no one here had seen a Sceltie. Vae had been an education for all of them. Powell, the Prince who was the Steward of the court, pushed away from the table. "With your permission, Lady, we'll leave you to begin the day's work." Cassidy nodded. "When I return, I'll stop at your office to review anything that requires my attention." "Certainly. Ranon? When you have a moment, I'd like to discuss the Lady's visit to your home village." "I'll join you shortly," Ranon replied. "Lady Shira and I will be ready in half an hour," Cassidy told Archerr. "I'll see you later," Gray said, brushing a fingertip over the back of Cassidy's hand. He's come so far so fast, Ranon thought as Gray and the rest of the men left the dining room. Now he's acting more like the Warlord Prince he should have been. When the last man left the room, he pushed aside the half-eaten bowl of porridge and Cassidy pushed the full plate of food in front of him. "Lady," he protested. "I ate," Cassidy said. "But we've agreed to live lean and not cook more than we need for each meal. You were out with the honey pear trees, and I had a feeling that there might not be anything left by the time you got here." Living lean. In the reserves, winter was called the Season of Hunger, so he knew about not wasting food. And he knew the unspoken rule of this court: Once everyone was served, what was left could be eaten by anyone who wanted more. The Blood's bodies needed more fuel than landens, and the darker the Jewel a person wore, the more food that person needed in order to remain a healthy vessel for the power that lived within. So everyone was willing to eat another helping when it was available. Because he'd been late, and because of Theran's remarks, he hadn't expected to get more than porridge that even hunger barely made tolerable. "If you have no objection to a solitary meal, Shira and I really should be going." "I've no objection," he said. He touched his fork to the edge of the plate. "Thanks for this." He waited until Cassidy and Shira left. Then he began eating with enthusiasm. As he poured the last of the coffee from the pot, it occurred to him that Cassidy had not only saved some food for him, she had used a warming spell on the plate so the food wouldn't get cold. A small thing, perhaps. A simple courtesy. But when simple courtesies came from a Queen, it said a great deal about how she would treat her people and, hopefully, how she would treat his. *Revue de presse* Praise for Shaladors LadyFans of the long running Black Jewels saga will relish this terrific entry. 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