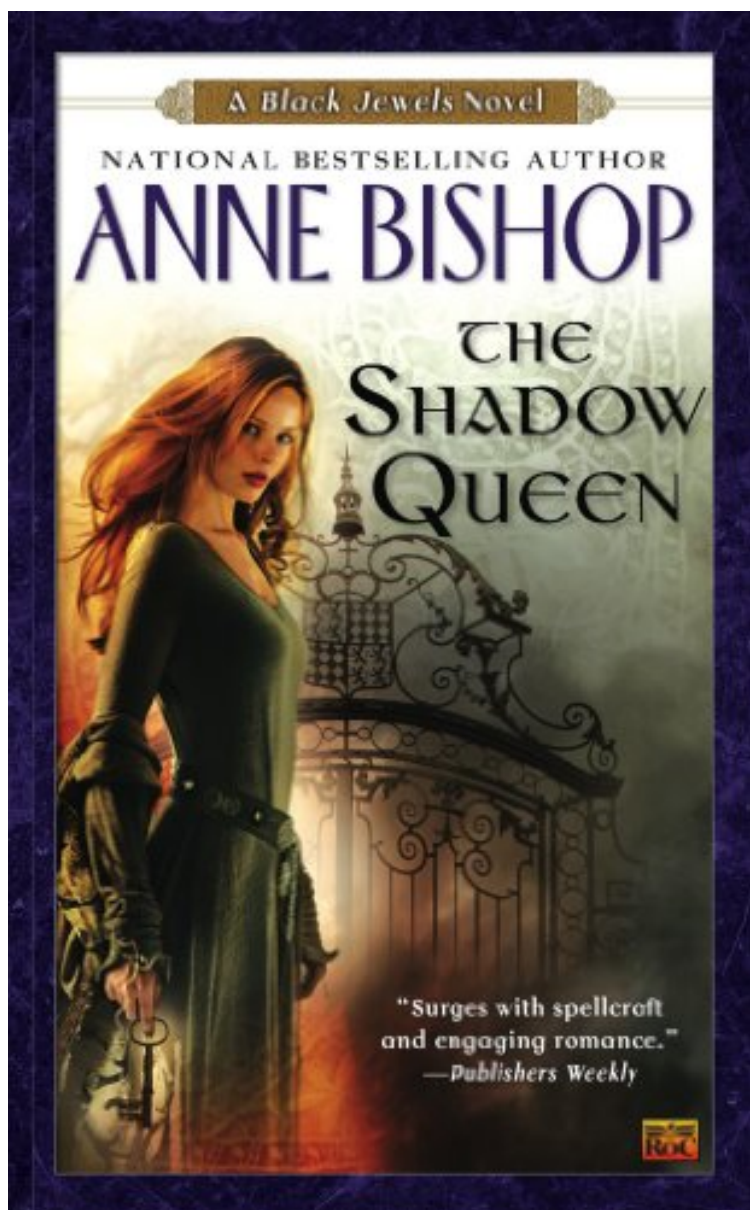


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# The Shadow Queen



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn a tumultuous world ruled by witches and warlocks who wear their power as jewels, one Queens chance at redemption is the last hope for a desperate people in this novel set in the world of the Black Jewels...Theran Grayhaven is the last of his line, desperate to restore the land of Dena Nehele. But first he needs to find a Queen who knows Protocol, remembers the Bloods code of honor, and lives by the Old Ways. Languishing in the Shadow Realm, Lady Cassidy is a Queen without a court, a castoff. But when she is chosen to rule Dena Nehele, she must convince bitter men to serve once again. Therans cousin Gray is a Warlord Prince who was damaged in mind and body by the vicious Queens who once ruled Dena Nehele.

Yet something about Cassidy makes him want to serve and makes him believe he can be made whole once again. And only Cassidy can prove to Gray and to herself that wounds can heal and even the whisper of a promise can be fulfilled... Extrait

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FOR CASS, MAGGIE, CHERIL, AND DEE

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JEWELS

WHITE

YELLOW

TIGER EYE

ROSE

SUMMER-SKY

PURPLE

DUSK

OPAL

GREEN

SAPPHIRE

RED

GRAY

EBON-GRAY

BLACK

\*Opal is the dividing line between lighter and darker Jewels because it can be either.

When making the Offering to the Darkness, a person can descend a maximum of three ranks from his/her Birthright Jewel.

Example: Birthright White could descend to Rose.

BLOOD HIERARCHY/CASTES

MALES

landennon-Blood of any race

Blood male

a general term for all males of the Blood; also refers to any Blood male who doesnt wear Jewels

Warlord

Jeweled male

equal in status to a witch

Prince

a Jeweled male

equal in status to a Priestess or a Healer

Warlord

Prince

a dangerous, extremely aggressive Jeweled male; in status, slightly lower than a Queen

FEMALES

landennon-Blood of any race

Blood female

a general term for all females of the Blood; mostly refers to any Blood female who doesnt wear Jewels

witch

a Blood female who wears Jewels but isnt one of the other hierarchical levels; also refers to any Jeweled female

Healer

a witch who heals physical wounds and illnesses; equal in status to a Priestess and a Prince

Priestess

a witch who cares for altars, sanctuaries, and Dark Altars; witnesses handfasts and

marriages; performs offerings; equal in status to a Healer and a Prince Black Widowa witch who heals the mind; weaves the tangled webs of dreams and visions; is trained in illusions and poisons Queen a witch who rules the Blood; is considered to be the lands heart and the Bloods moral center; as such, she is the focal point of their society

PLACES IN THE REALM

STERREILLE

Dena Nehele

TAMANARA MOUNTAINS

GRAYHAVEN BOTH A FAMILY ESTATE AND A Town

Ebon Askavi (aka the Black Mountain, the Keep)

Hayll

Zuulaman

KAELEER (THE SHADOW REALM)

Askavi

Ebon ASKAVI (AKA THE BLACK MOUNTAIN, THE KEEP)

Ebon

RIHVALLEY THAT IS THE KEEPS TERRITORY

RIADABLOOD VILLAGE in Ebon Rih

Dea al Mon

Dharo

WEAVERS FIELD

BLOOD VILLAGE

BHAKBLOOD VILLAGE

WOOLSKINLANDEN VILLAGE

Dhemlan

AMDARH

CAPITAL CITY

HALAWAY VILLAGE NEAR SADIABLO HALLS

SADIABLO HALL (THE HALL)

Nharkhava

TAJARAN

CAPITAL CITY

Scelt (shelt)

MAGHRE (MA-GRA)

VILLAGE

HELL (THE DARK REAM, THE REALM OF THE DEAD)

Ebon Askavi (aka the Black Mountain, the Keep)

SADIABLO HALL

PROLOGUE

TERREILLE

Two years ago

Still shaken by the storm of power that had destroyed half the Blood in Dena Nehele only a few days before, the rogues came down from their camps in the Tamanara Mountains to face an unexpected enemy. The landens, who had been brutalized for generations by the caretakers of the Realms, hadnt wasted time. When they realized the surviving Blood were stunned by the violent loss of Queens and courts, they rebelled and decided that dying by the thousands was an acceptable price to pay in order to wipe out the Blood in Dena Nehele. So the landens died during those first days of the uprising. Oh, how they died. But so did the Blood. The males in the Bloods towns and villages died as they exhausted the power that made the Blood who and what they were, until even the ones who wore Jewels and had a reservoir of power had used up everything they had in the effort to defend the women and children who didnt have the strength or skill to defend themselves. When that power that lived within them was gone, they fought with weapons like any other man. But the landens kept coming, kept fighting and the Blood, outnumbered, had no chance of surviving. Women and children died, along with the men. The landens, steeped in their hatred for the Blood, set fire to the buildings, turning entire villages into funeral pyres. Then the rogues, trained warriors who had refused to serve any Queen, came down from the mountains and the battle for Dena Nehele really began. He rode with one pack of rogues, a leader committed to slaughter in order to defend what was left of his people. But as they reached a walled estate on their way to the town that served as Dena Neheles capital, he pulled his horse aside and stared through the iron bars of a double gate at the big stone mansion. Grayhaven. It was his family name. This was his familys home. He had never lived in that mansion because the Queens who had controlled Dena Nehele had claimed it for their own residence, their own seat of power. And like the rest of the Territory, the house and the land had declined under the rule of bitches who had stood in the shadow of Dorothea SaDiablo, the High Priestess of Hayll. He had grown up in the mountain camps ruled by the rogues because he was the last of his line, the last direct descendant of Lord Jared and Lady Lia, the Queen who, like her grandmother before her, had been called the Gray Lady. And if there was any truth to the family stories, he was the last person capable of finding the key that would reveal a treasure great enough to restore Dena Nehele. Lord Jared had told his grandsons about the treasure the Gray Lady and Thera, a powerful Black Widow, had hidden somewhere around Grayhaven. While the family still lived in the house, every male had searched for it, and the story had spread to trusted advisers who shouldnt have been trusted. When the family line failed to produce even a minor Queen, Dorotheas pet Queens had descended on Dena Nehele like scavengers fighting over a fresh carcass. What was left of his family abandoned Grayhaven and spoke the family name only in secret. Generations had tried to hold on to something that was Dena Nehele, that was the Blood as they had been when the Gray Lady had ruled. Generations of the Grayhaven line had been broken into service as a way of keeping the people yoked to the rule of unworthy Queens. Generations of suffering until that witch storm swept through Terreille. A fast, violent storm, terrible in its cleansing, it had swept away Dorothea SaDiablo and everyone who had been tainted by her, but it had left the surviving Blood prey to the landens hatred. Theran! one of the Warlords shouted. The bastards have set fire to the south end of the town! He wanted to ride through those gates, wanted to protect the only thing left of his own heritage. But he had been trained to fight, had been born to stand on a killing field. So he turned away from the house and land he wanted to reclaim. But as he rode away, he promised himself that when the fires of rebellion were finally smothered, he would come back to his familys home. If there was anything left.

CHAPTER 1

TERREILLE

present

Reaching the broken-down stone wall and the double gate that was half-torn from its hinges, Theran Grayhaven planted his feet in the exact spot where hed stood two years before. Now, finally,

the landen uprising had been completely smothered, and the Bloodthose who were leftcould set about the business of trying to restore their land and their people.If there was any way of restoring their people.Since you invited them here, youre going to feel like a fool if youre still standing at the gate when the other Warlord Princes arrive.Theran looked over his shoulder. He hadnt heard the other man approach, hadnt felt a warning presence. Even a month ago, being that careless would have gotten him killed.You shouldnt be up before sunset, Theran said. It drains you too much.The old man scowled at the wall and the gateand all the other signs of neglect. Ill manage.Youll need blood tonight.The scowl deepened. Ill manage.Talon . . .Dont be using that voice on me, boy. I can still whack some sense into that stubborn head of yours.Talon was a grizzled warrior who was missing two fingers on his left hand and half his right footevidence of the price paid for the battles won. He was also a Sapphire-Jeweled Warlord Prince. Since Theran was a Warlord Prince who wore Green Jewels,Talon was the only man in Dena Nehele who was strong enough to whack some sense into him.But only after the sun set.Talon was demon-dead. If he was forced to act during daylight hours, his strength drained at a terrifying speed.Did you ever wonder if it was worth it? Theran asked, looking away from the man who had raised him.He had never known his father. The man had mated to continue the Grayhaven bloodline and had been caught, broken, and completely destroyed before Theran had been born.When he was seven, his mother had brought him to the mountain camps to keep the Grayhaven line safe from Dorotheas pet Queens.He never saw her again.Talon looked at the mansion and shook his head. I was in this fight for three hundred years, give or take a few. I knew Lia, and I knew Grizelle before her. I stood with Jared and Blaed when we were all among the livingand I stood with others when I became demon-dead. So I never wondered if bringing Dena Nehele back to the way it was when the Gray Ladies ruled was worth the blood and pain and lives that were lost. I knew getting that back was worth the price.We didnt win, Talon, Theran said softly. Someone else eliminated the enemy, but we still didnt win.A Grayhaven is standing once more on the family land. Thats a start. And there is a marker on the table.A marker Talon hadnt told him about until a few days ago. A dangerous one, assuming the man who owes us a favor is still alive.Theres no way to win unless we gamble, Talon said. Come on. Well bring the Coach onto the grounds and camp out here tonight. Tomorrow you can go through the house and see what needs to be done.Well be lucky if we find anything intact, Theran said bitterly. I cant imagine the bitches who ruled from here not trying to find the treasure.But the key wasnt in the house, Talon said. Thats part of the legend. And without the key that begins unlocking the spells, they could have ripped up every floorboard and knocked down every brick in every fireplace, and they still wouldnt have found the treasure even if they were looking right at it.Doesnt mean were going to find a safe floor or a working fireplace, Theran grumbled.Do your pissing and moaning later, Talon said. Weve got company. Ill fetch the Coach. You give yourself a kick in the ass and get up to the house.Yes, sir.Surrogate father and protector of the Grayhaven line, Talon had held him when hed cried and hadnt hesitated to give him a smack when it was deservedat least, deserved according to Talon. Everything good that he knew about the Blood, about honor and Protocol and what a Warlord Prince should be, he had learned from a man who remembered Dena Nehele as it had been. Who remembered what it meant to have honor. To wear, as Talon put it, the Invisible Ring.Bracing himself for the discussion ahead, Theran strode toward the mansion.Was the honey pear tree still in the back gardens somewhere? Could the tree have survived that many centuries? There had been a few honey pear trees growing in one of the rogue camps low in the mountains, and there was a grove of themor so hed heardtucked away in the southern part of Dena Nehele, in one of the Shalador reserves. Having heard stories about Jareds mother growing the honey pear trees for her sons and how Jared had gifted Lia with his tree and given another to Thera and Blaed, hed been disappointed when hed finally gotten to taste one of the hard little fruits. But Talon said the trees didnt grow well in the mountains, that something they needed was lacking, and that was the reason the fruit didnt taste right.Well, the trees werent the only things that had felt a need that had gone unanswered.Talon set the Coach down on the scrubby front lawn, while Theran watched the Warlord Princes appear near the gate as they dropped from the Winds, those webs of psychic roadways that allowed the Blood to travel through the Darkness.It wasnt until Talon limped over to join him that the first Warlord Princes came through the gate, walking up the weedy drive in pairs, the lightest-Jeweled males coming first.\*I count about a hundred,\* Talon said on a psychic thread.\*Thats probably every Warlord Prince left in Dena Nehele,\* Theran replied.\*Probably. And a better response than Id hoped for.\*What wasnt said was that only a handful of those men wore an Opal that was considered a dark Jewel. He and Talon, wearing Green and Sapphire, were the strongest males in the Territory. Everyone else wore lighter Jewels.They formed a semicircle around him and Talon, the lighter Jewels leaving spaces so the

darker-Jeweled males could stand in the front. Except for one Opal-Jeweled Warlord Prince who stood apart from the others a Prince whose golden brown skin marked him as having a Shalador bloodline. Maybe even being pure Shalador. Lord Jareds coloring. Lord Jareds race. Theran resisted the urge to look at his own hand and see the similarities. Would you care to join us, Prince Ranon? Talon said. I can hear from where Im standing, was the chilly reply. Talon nodded as if the less-than-courteous response made no difference. Prince Archerr, another who wore Opal Jewels, stepped forward. You called us here, and we answered. But none of us can afford to be gone long. The landens have to be held on a tight leash, and some of us are the only trained warrior left in our piece of Dena Nehele. Theran nodded. Then Ill come to the point. We need a Queen. A moment of disbelieving silence before several men made derisive sounds. Tell us something we dont know, Spere said. Weve got Queens, more or less, Archerr said. Would you serve any of them? Theran asked. When the sun shines in Hell. Mutters with an undercurrent of anger. We have Queens, Theran said. Women who, even in their prime, werent considered strong enough to be a concern to the Queens who whored for Dorothea SaDiablo. And we have Queens who are still little girls, barely old enough to begin training in basic Craft. And we have a handful who are adolescents. One being a fifteen-year-old whos turning into such a ripe bitch she may not live long enough to be sixteen, Archerr said bitterly. We need a Queen who knows how to be a Queen, Theran said. We need a Queen who could rule Dena Nehele in the same tradition as the Gray Lady. You wont find one of those within our own borders, Spere said. Dont you think weve all been looking? And if you look beyond our borders to find a Queen mature enough to rule, the males in that Territory arent going to give up anyone good. And since I live in a village along the western border, I can tell you the Territories west of us arent doing any better. I know, Theran replied. Then where are we supposed to find a Queen? Archerr asked. In Kaeleer. Silence. Not even embarrassed coughs or shuffling feet. Theres no way into Kaeleer except through the service fairs, Shaddo said. At least, no other way to get into the Shadow Realm and stay alive long enough to state your business. Yes, there is, Theran said, grateful that he and Talon had considered this possibility. Someone goes to the Black Mountain. Ninety-eight men stared at him. And does what? Archerr asked quietly. Theran glanced at Talon, who nodded. Theres a Warlord Prince who owes my family a favor. That wasnt exactly the way Talon had phrased it. More like, For Jareds sake and memory, he might be willing to do the family a favor. If I can find him . . . You think this Prince can get us a Queen from Kaeleer? Shaddo asked. Who has that kind of influence and power? Theran took a deep breath. Daemon Sadi. Ninety-eight Warlord Princes shivered. The Sadist owes your family a favor? Archerr asked. Theran nodded. A dozen voices muttered, Hells fire, Mother Night, and may the Darkness be merciful. Talon and I talked it over and figured asking at the Keep is the simplest way of finding out if anyone knows where Sadi is. He could be dead, Spere said, sounding a little hopeful. His brother disappeared years ago, didnt he? Maybe Sadi got caught in that storm like the rest of the Blood. Maybe, Talon said. And maybe hes no longer among the living. But even if hes demon-dead, he still might be able to help. And if hes among the demon-dead who went to the Dark Realm, going to the Keep is still our best chance of finding him. What happens if we do get a Queen from Kaeleer? Shaddo asked. Then at least twelve males have to be willing to serve her and form her First Circle, Theran said. Well have to form a court. Some of us will have to serve. The next words stuck in his throat, but on this too, he and Talon had agreed. And Grayhaven will be offered as her place of residence. You say well have to form a court, Ranon said, still sounding cold. Will Shalador be asked to serve? Will Shalador be allowed to serve? Or will the blood that also flows through your veins, Prince Theran, be held to the reserves, ignored unless were needed for fodder? Before anyone could draw a line and start a fight that would end with someone dying, Talon raised his hand, commanding their attention. That will be up to the Queen, Ranon, he said quietly. Were all going to hone the blade and offer her our throats. Hoping we wont end up with someone who will crush what is left of us? Ranon asked. Hoping exactly that, Talon replied. A long silence. Ranon took a step back, then hesitated. If a Kaeleer Queen comes to Dena Nehele, some of the Shalador people will offer themselves for her pleasure. Talon looked thoughtful as they all watched Ranon walk back to the gate. Nothing was said until the Shalador Warlord Prince caught one of the Winds and vanished. If you can get a Queen from Kaeleer . . . Archerr didnt finish the sentence. Ill send a message, Theran said. The Warlord Princes retreated to the gate. No breaking into groups, no talking among themselves. Some looked back at him and Talon. Looks like youre going to the Keep, Talon said. Theran nodded as he watched the last man vanish. Which do you think worries them more? That I wont be able to find Sadi or that I will? CHAPTER 2 KAELEER Cassidy sat back on her heels and brushed her chin with the tail of her long red braid. So, she said as she considered the ground in front of her. Does the rock stay or does the rock go? Since the question had been offered to the air and the

patch of garden in front of her, she didnt expect an answer. Besides, it wasnt really her decision. Shed volunteered to clear the weeds out of this bed as a way to have something to do and a way to work with a little piece of land. But this was her mothers garden, and whether the rock was an unwanted obstacle or a desired, important part of the whole depended on how one looked at it. Which was true of so many things. Its done and cant be undone, she muttered. So enjoy your visit here, do what you can, and let the rest go. Let the rest go. How long would it take before her heart let go of the humiliation? Well, at least I found out before I put in all the spring work on those g-gardens. Her voice wobbled and tears blurred her vision. Swallowing the hurt that wanted to spill out every moment she didnt keep her feelings chained, she reviewed the containers of seeds she had collected last year from the Queens garden in Bhak. That garden wasnt hers anymore, so her mother would benefit by having a few new plants this year. Your mother said Id find you here. The voice, always rough because the vocal cords had been damaged in a boyhood accident, made her smile as she looked over her shoulder at the burly man walking toward her. Burly in body, Burle by name. A simple man. A handyman. Twice each month he would stay at a landen village for three days and take jobs to fix whatever needed fixing. Most Blood thought it was beneath a Warlords dignity to work for landenseven if the Warlord wore a Jewel as light as Tiger Eye. Hed always said, Work is work, and the marks they pay me with are as good as any that come from some snot-nosed aristo family. That attitude didnt get him work in houses owned by Blood aristos here in Weavers Field, their home village, or in other nearby Blood villages, but the rest of the Blood didnt care what Burle said about aristos, and the landens liked having that little bit extra that came from a man who could use some Craft along with a hammer and didnt talk down to them. The fact that Lord Burle always gave them that little bit extra and more meant he had as much work as he wanted. Her heart warmed to see him and a moment later began hammering with alarm. Why are you home? Is something wrong? Burle made a show of looking at the sky before focusing on his daughter. Well, Kitten, its midday. Foods on the table. Youre still out here. Your mother has that look. You know that look? Oh, yes. She knew that look. So, Burle continued, I was sent out to fetch you. Not likely. Sent out, maybe. But not to fetch her. She loved her mother, Devra, but there were some things she could say only to her father. She just wasnt ready to say them. All right, Father. What are you up to? She put enough emphasis on the word Father to tell him she knew he was up to something. When the only response she got was his frowning at her under those bushy eyebrows her mother subtly kept subdued with grooming Craft, she tried not to sigh as she said, Poppi. He nodded, satisfied that hed made his point. Your mother said you came out here right after breakfast. Seemed like a long time to be digging up weeds, so I thought Id give you a hand. But it looks like youve got that bed in good order. He frowned at the gloves lying on the ground beside her. Cassidy held up her hands. I wore the heavy gloves. I used a tight shield to protect the palms. And I used a little Craft to turn over the bits of the garden that were obstinate. And if it really was midday, shed spent far more time staring at nothing and trying not to think than shed spent on actual labor. Burle crouched beside her, took her hands in his, and studied her palms. Nothing wrong with a few calluses, but a hand thats torn up cant serve. He gave her hands a gentle squeeze and let go. Still, you didnt need to do all of this yourself. My father taught me that there was nothing wrong with hard work or sweat. Laughing, he stood up, bringing her with him. I used to wonder if your brother, Clayton, heard half of what I said. And I used to worry that you heard too much. He rested a hand on her shoulder. Youre a good woman, Kitten. And youre a good Queen. Good Queen? Control broke, and the pain shed been living with since shed shown up at her parents house the week before flooded out of her. Poppi, my entire court resigned. All the males in my First Circle all twelve of them, including the Steward and Master of the Guard informed me that they wanted to serve another Queen. A Queen who had served her apprenticeship in my court. She was their choice. For everything. For everything, Poppi. She sobbed out all the hurt, the shock of betrayal. Only bad Queens were abandoned. Only abusive Queens had their First Circle walk away, breaking the court. Only . . . She couldnt think about the man who had been her Consort. That hurt went too deep. She wasnt pretty. Had never been pretty. She was tall, big-boned, and gawky. She had red hair and freckles, and a long, plain face. She didnt come from a wealthy family or an aristo family. Except for a distant cousin, Aaron, who was the Warlord Prince of Tajrana and was married to the Queen of Nharkhava, there was no social status connected with knowing her or being in her bed. And since she wore a Rose Jewel, she didnt have the kind of power that would intrigue anyone. There was no reason for anyone to look twice at her. Except that she was a Queen, an oddity in a family that had rarely produced anyone who wore a dark Jewel, let alone someone who was in the most powerful caste the ruling caste. Now she was a Queen without a court. She felt as if something had been ripped out of her, and she didnt know how to stanch the emotional wound. Lady Kermilla had the First

Circle who had served her, the Blood and landen villages she had ruled, the house she had lived in, and the gardens she had tended. She hadn't wanted to be important, hadn't wanted to become a Province Queen and rule over District Queens. And she certainly had no ambitions to become the Queen of the whole Territory of Dharo. She'd been happy ruling Bhak and Woolskin. She had wanted to make her piece of Dharo a good place to live for Blood and landens alike. But the males who had served her had seen her court as a stepping-stone to serving in more influential courts ruled by stronger Queens. When they realized she wasn't going to be a stepping-stone to anything, they grimly fulfilled their contracts and walked away from her and straight into a contract with Kermilla, a pretty, vivacious Queen who was ready to establish her first court. Kermilla wore Summer-sky, which wasn't a dark enough Jewel to be a big lure, but she had some social connections, could dazzle stronger males without offending . . . and was twenty-one years old. There now, Kitten, Burle said as he patted her back. Don't take on so. It's no shame on you that you ended up with a First Circle who has to drop their pants in order to use their brains. The image that popped into Cassidy's head stopped the flow of tears. Made her hiccup. Ended with a watery giggle. That's better. Burle called in a neatly folded handkerchief. Mop up or you'll end up on the sofa with bags of salad over your eyes. It's a slice of cucumber, Poppi. You put a slice of cucumber over your eyes. Cassidy mopped her face and blew her nose. Mother swears by that remedy. Huh, Burle said. Nothing wrong with the way your mother looks. First thing in the morning, last thing at night, and every hour in between, she looks just fine. He meant it. And because he meant it, and because she'd inherited the red hair and freckles from Devra, she'd thought the man who had been her Consort had also meant it when he said he thought she was lovely. When he'd left, the bastard had told her what he really thought. Well, Cassidy said, vanishing the handkerchief, we'd best get to the table before Mother comes out here, don't you think? That we should. Slinging an arm around her shoulders, Burle aimed them for the house. I'll say one more thing. I remember meeting Lady Kermilla when she was serving her apprenticeship in your court, and I'll tell you this, Kitten. If those fools chose her over you, then they deserve what they're going to get. Maybe. Probably. When she'd sent Kermilla's evaluation to the Province Queen, she'd tried to be kind, but there had been no denying that she'd had concerns about Kermilla's attitude toward anyone who wasn't strong enough to fight back. Their loss, my gain, Burle said. I've got the two finest women in the whole Territory living in my house. For a little while, Cassidy said. What's that mean? I'm just visiting, Poppi. Next week, I'll start looking for a place of my own. A very simple place, since there hadn't been much left of the tithes she received from Bhak and Woolskin, not after paying the court expenses and sending the Province Queen her share. That had been her income while she ruled, and the fact that there was any left was due to her careful upbringing and her mother's firm belief that a good life didn't have to be an expensive life. And since it was her income and what she'd saved from the tithes was all she had, she would continue to tear up Kermilla's letters, which all asked the same thing: how much was the former Queen of Bhak going to gift the new Queen? What do you mean, you're getting your own place? Burle said. What for? I'm thirty-one years old, Poppi. A grown woman doesn't live with her parents. He stopped so fast he pulled her off-balance. Why not? What can you do in your own place that you can't do? His face flushed as he came to an obvious and incorrect conclusion about what a woman wouldn't want to do in her parents' house. Well now, he muttered, lengthening his stride and pulling her with him. We'll just see what your mother has to say about that. We'll just see. She already knew what Devra would say, but this wasn't the time to tell her father he was outnumbered. Yes, Poppi, she said fondly. We'll just see. CHAPTER 3 Ebon ASKAVI Why am I doing this? Saetan Daemon SaDiablo, the former Warlord Prince of Dhemplan, glanced at Daemon Sadi, the current Warlord Prince of Dhemplan, and swallowed the urge to laugh. That tone of voice was more suited to a surly adolescent than a strong adult male in his prime, and being Hayllian, one of the long-lived races, Daemon had left adolescence behind several centuries ago. But he'd noticed that there were times when Daemon and his brother, Lucivar Yaslana, set adulthood and a good portion of their brains aside and were just . . . boys. They seemed to test the emotional waters of adolescence when they were alone with him. Maybe it was because he'd been denied the privilege of raising them and the three of them hadn't gone through the pissing contests they would have all endured if they'd lived with him. Maybe it was because they'd had to grow up too hard and too fast in order to survive the vicious slavery that had been used to control them. At least, that had attempted to control them. The slavery, the pain, the fear, and the cruelty had turned two young men, two Warlord Princes who were natural predators, into lethally honed weapons. They were intelligent and vicious. Loyal and loving. Powerful and independent. Fiercely protective of those they loved to a sometimes annoying degree. They were his sons, and he loved them both. But the one standing at the other end of the table, looking at him through long black eyelashes, was his mirror, his true heir. And

since he was, among other things, the High Lord of Hell, the fact that Daemon was a mirror was something he never forgot. Why am I doing this? Daemon asked again. Because when you arrived at the Keep in Kaeleer and discovered I was here at the Keep in Terreille, you came through the Gate to this Realm in order to ask me something about the family estates. And when you saw me sorting reams of old papers, you asked if there was anything you could do to help. That was a polite offer, not a sincere one, Daemon grumbled. I know, Saetan replied dryly. But I chose to take the words at face value. Daemon snarled softly and went back to sorting papers. Saetan hid a smile and concentrated on clearing out the stacks of papers at his end of the table. What are you planning to do with this? Daemon asked several minutes later. Bring it back to the Keep in Kaeleer? Why in the name of Hell would I do that? Marian says shredded parchment makes a good mulch for flower beds. Marian was Lucivars wife, a lovely woman and a talented hearth witch whose gentler nature balanced her husbands volatile one. But there were times, Saetan felt, when hearth-Craft practicality needed to be put aside for a more direct and simple solution. Im planning to haul this out to one of the stone courtyards, put a shield around it to keep it contained, blast it with witchfire, and transform several wagonloads of useless paper into a barrel of ash. If you asked Marian to help, youd get this done a lot faster. I bet she knows several tidy-up spells, Daemon said. Then he paused. Considered. Well, maybe you wouldnt get it done faster, but Marian would be thorough. Damn the boy for knowing just where to apply the needle in order to prick and annoy. He wasnt trying to clean the place; he was trying to eliminate reams of history so old it was no longer of any use to anyone including the long-lived races. Well, two could play the needle game. If I wanted things to get interesting, I could ask Jaenelle to help. Daemon looked at the parchment in his hand, tipped it a little closer to the ball of witchlight hovering over the table so he could read the faded script . . . and paled. Saetan had no idea what was written on that parchment, but clearly the thought of Jaenelle Angeline, the former Queen of Ebon Askavi and now Daemons darling wife, having that information was sufficient to scare a Black-Jeweled Warlord Prince. Daemon put the paper on the discard pile and quietly cleared his throat. I think the two of us can take care of this without mentioning it to the Ladies. A wise decision. And the same conclusion hed come to when hed decided to clear out some of this stuff. They worked for another hour. Then Saetan said, Thats all that can be done today. Daemon looked around. Theyd thrown the discarded papers into a large crate, but the table and surrounding floor were still strewn with stacks that hadnt been touched. Its midday, Prince, Saetan said. Daemon nodded. I hadnt realized it had gotten so late. The hours between sunset and sunrise were the part of the day that belonged to the demon-dead and Guardians, the ones like Saetan who were the living dead, who straddled a line that extended their lifetimes beyond counting. During the years when Jaenelle had lived with him as his adopted daughter, his habits had changed and his waking hours had extended through the morning so that he would be available to the living. But even here at the Keep, the Sanctuary of Witch, he needed to rest when the sun was at its strongest. Lets go back to the Keep in Kaeleer, Saetan said. Well wash up, have something to eat before I retire, and you can ask me about whatever youd originally come here to ask. The library door opened before they reached it. A Warlord who served the Keep in Terreille nodded to them and said, High Lord, a Warlord Prince has arrived. His name? Saetan asked. He wouldnt offer it, the Warlord replied. And he wouldnt say which Territory hes from. He says hes looking for someone, and he insists on talking to someone in authority. Does he? Saetan said softly. How foolish of him. Put our guest in one of the receiving rooms. Ill be with him shortly. Yes, High Lord. The Warlords look of gleeful anticipation told Saetan how deeply the idiot had offended those who served the Keep by not following the basic courtesies. Fools who tried to withhold their names when asking to speak with someone here were usually given as much as theyd offered which was nothing. When the Warlord left, Saetan turned and touched Daemons arm. Why dont you go back to Kaeleer and ask for a meal. Ill talk to this unknown Prince and join you when Im done. I doubt this will take more than a few minutes. The air around them chilled a warning that a violent temper was turning cold, cold, cold. If youre going to talk to anyone from Terreille, you should have someone watching your back, Daemon said too softly. He wasnt sure if he should feel flattered or insulted by his sons desire to protect, but he decided it was best to keep his own temper out of this conversation especially now that Daemons temper had turned lethal. Have you forgotten that Im a Black-Jeweled Warlord Prince and do know how to defend myself? One sweep of those golden eyes that were now glazed and sleepy. One pointed look at his left hand which was missing the little finger. I havent forgotten anything, Daemon crooned. A shiver went down Saetans spine. The boyish posturing was gone. Even their relationship as father and son was gone. The man before him was a Warlord Prince of equal rank, who was standing one step away from the killing edge. A Warlord Prince the Blood in Terreille had called the Sadist. A man who was capable of

doing anything if provoked the wrong way. And that, more than anything else, was reason enough to get Daemon out of Terreille. Would you have told Lucivar he had to have someone guarding his back? Saetan asked. I wouldn't have needed to, Daemon replied. He would have known I'd stand with him. This isn't a fight, Saetan thought. But he caught, too late, the undercurrent that had been hiding beneath the boyish posturing. For Daemon, simply being back in Terreille meant being prepared to fight. To kill. Prince, I'm asking you to return to Kaeleer. This is the Keep. It's a sanctuary. To treat someone as an enemy simply because they've come here requesting information would be a violation of everything this place stands for. Daemon, it isn't done. At least, not by another guest. What guarded the mountain called Ebon Askavi passed its own judgment on anyone entering the Keep. And people who entered did not always leave. I'm sorry I didn't realize how difficult it is for you to be in this Realm, even here at the Keep, Saetan said. If I had, we would have left hours ago. That keen mind assessed his words while those golden eyes assessed him. You'll shield? Daemon finally asked. I will shield. Despite his efforts to hold on to his own temper, the words came out in a growl. Daemon's lips twitched in a reluctant smile. You would have made the same demand of me if I was the one staying. Of course I would, but that's different. I'm your father. Daemon's smile and the air around them warmed. Fine. I'll go back to Kaeleer and see about getting us a meal. Saetan waited, tense, until he no longer felt the presence of the other Black Jewel. Confirmation that Daemon had gone through the Gate and returned to Kaeleer. Then he sagged against the doorway until he heard the sound of Craft-enhanced footsteps announcing the Warlord's return. *Revue de presse* Praise for *The Shadow Queen* A strong romantic fantasy. *Alternative Worlds* Anne Bishop does not disappoint. I have not read a book of hers that did not immediately captivate me and draw me immediately back into her world... [She] weaves her spell so well... Her characters seem so real and engaging. *SF Revue* Surges with spellcraft and engaging romance. *Publishers Weekly* Black Jewel fans won't want to miss this installment which offers a different look on the realms of the Blood. *Dear Author* Superb. *Specusphere* In this stand-alone novel set in the evocative Black Jewels world, Bishop tackles surviving various horrors head-on... It's a difficult subject, but one that Bishop writes about sensitively, with compassion and without blinking or pulling punches. *RT Book*