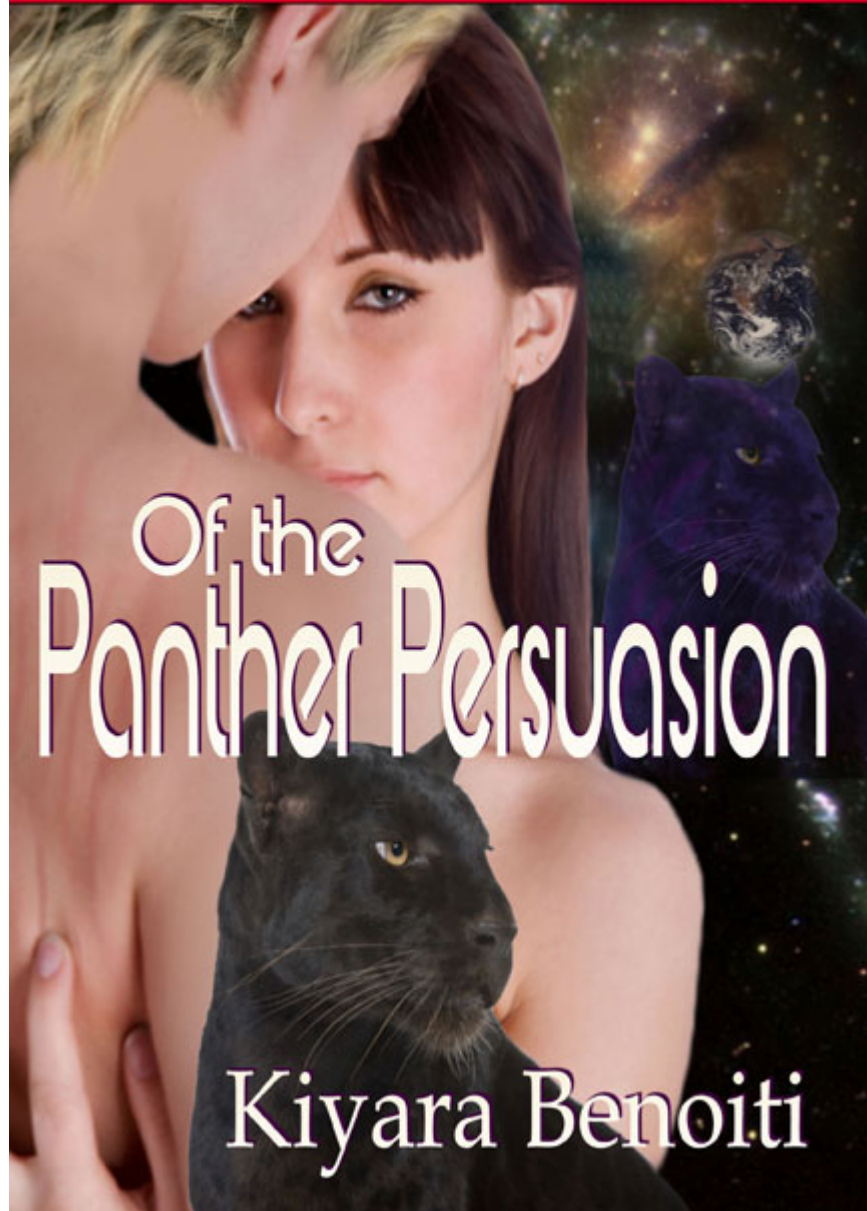


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*



Of the  
Panther Persuasion

Kiyara Benoiti

## Of the Panther Persuasion

Shalamar lives comfortably, but she has a secret--a secret that ranks up there with creatures that go bump in the night. As the Pantherian Heir and a refugee from another world, she lives quietly, sating her desires with human men and wishing she could find others like herself. When she's invited to Stallion Acres to meet another of her race, one who's filthy rich, she's plunged into dangers which threaten her life and that of her unexpected, newfound love and life mate, Drayden Parks.

Nahdia is wealthy and power-hungry. She intends to establish shape-changers on Earth and make this world hers, but when Shalamar's secret is revealed and she thwarts Nahdia, she must fight to save Drayden's life as well as her own. When the others turn on her, she must flee back to her world. However, the price of returning home might be too high.

**Genre:** Contemporary, Paranormal

**Length:** 20,613 words

# **OF THE PANTHER PERSUASION**

**Kiyara Benoit**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



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# **Letter from Kiyara Benoit**

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Kiyara Benoit

## **DEDICATION**

*For every reader who loves to read erotic romance involving shape-shifters and things that go bump in the night...or under the sheets.*

# **OF THE PANTHER PERSUASION**

**KIYARA BENOITI**

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## **Chapter One**

He slipped his hand between Shalamar's thighs and palmed her through her panties. A gasp fled her lips, and she dropped her head back as his fingers created hot tendrils of desire that coursed through her pussy. No matter how hard she tried, Shalamar could never see his face. Oh, how she wanted him, how she needed him to push her down on the floor or a bed and thrust between her legs, his cock stretching her until it burned as he took her to the greatest heights of passion. She desired to feel him stiffen in pleasure and spurt his seed against her womb.

He wiggled his fingers under the crotch of her underwear and slid first one finger into her cunt, followed by a second. He spread her pussy, stroking her inner walls until she thought she'd go mad.

Shalamar cried out and gripped the doorframe to keep from falling. Wave after wave of the orgasm cascaded through her. Panting, she waited as the vision disappeared and the desire for the unknown lover faded.

For the third time that week, Shalamar had seen the man's body, felt his touch, and inhaled his intoxicating scent. His fingers had tweaked her nipples and played with her cunt as his body had pressed against hers, but she'd never been able to actually see his face. That's how it was with her kind when they were about to meet their life



mate. However, there hadn't been any new males in this city for years, so how was it possible her mate was near?

Or perhaps she was just so lonely and lost in this world that her subconscious had taken matters into its own hands and dredged up the perfect lover from deep within her mind. The male had the body of Adonis, so Shalamar could only hope she would meet her mystery mate one day.

Whatever the reason for the visions, anxiety seemed to plague Shalamar as well. Nervous butterflies zipped around in her stomach. Something tickled her senses, but she just couldn't quite put her finger on what was bothering her. She brushed the unease away and chalked it up to meeting new people at the impending dinner that night.

Shalamar pulled the apartment door shut and locked it. The flat had been vacant for nearly eight weeks, so she hoped the elderly couple she'd shown it to fifteen minutes ago decided to rent the place.

Glancing at her wristwatch, she decided to return to her apartment to get ready for the gala that night. She strode down the corridor and punched the button on the elevator just as the new tenant stepped out of his flat.

"Hey," he said. "Did you have any luck renting that small apartment?"

Shalamar smiled at Drayden Parks. Although she liked her men tall, dark-haired, and dark-eyed, there was something about the blond, blue-eyed Drayden that intrigued her. Well, besides his sexier-than-hell body.

"They're going to think about it and then let me know," she replied, trying not to ogle him, "but I think they're probably going to take the place."

"That's good news. I always worry about having rowdy neighbors or someone with noisy kids." He tugged his door shut and locked it.

"Oh? Don't you like kids?" She admired his tanned, long-fingered hands as he manipulated the key ring to his apartment.

“I love them, but it’s hard to write music if your neighbors make a lot of noise.”

She nodded. “Good point.”

“Mind if I ride down with you?” he asked as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. He fixed her with an intense look, one that said he might find her as attractive as she found him.

A flutter passed through her heart. Why did this man always have the knack to unsettle her and make her knees tremble? Smiling, she motioned for Drayden to join her.

As they descended to the ground floor, Shalamar couldn’t help but let her gaze wander over her tenant’s physique. Depending on the lighting, Drayden had a face that often looked chiseled and he possessed a body to match. She’d seen the Bowflex and the weights he’d moved into the apartment, plus he’d told her that he jogged every other day and played racquetball at the local gym. His eyelashes were almost platinum, and his eyes were as deep blue as a brand new Crayola crayon.

However, there was still something that Shalamar sensed from Drayden that perplexed her, but what? The sensation was like a word that perched on the tip of her tongue.

The elevator doors opened on the second floor, and a female tenant in her mid-forties stepped inside. She exchanged pleasantries with Shalamar, but upon reaching the ground level, the woman and Drayden began talking as they strode to the front exit together.

Watching them, Shalamar sighed. Would he take the woman out and buy her a cup of coffee? Or would they part ways in the parking lot? With another heavier sigh, Shalamar shook away her musings and misgivings and hurried to her apartment. Ebonee was due to arrive any time. She’d told her friend to go on inside and make herself at home if she wasn’t there.

Opening the door, she called, “Anyone here?”

“In the kitchen,” a voice yelled back.

“I’ll be there in a jiff,” Shalamar said as she walked down the main hall of her abode. “I’m going to change first.”

In her bedroom, she stripped off her slacks and light sweater. She pulled on a pair of thigh-high leather boots, zipped them up, and then stood in front of a full-length mirror. Shalamar quickly applied makeup, a flowery perfume to mask her scent, and a low-cut red blouse to go with her black velvet skirt. Finished, she hurried back through the apartment to the kitchen where Ebonee waited.

“How do I look?” Shalamar spun around in front of her friend.

“Sexy and fantastic as usual,” Ebonee replied, her smile bright against her light olive skin.

Shalamar picked up a sealed foil envelope of gourmet candy on the counter, placed it in a box, and reached across Ebonee to retrieve the triple-layered cake she’d purchased from Shock-Co-Late on the far side of town.

“Shalamar,” said Ebonee, “I wasn’t sure if the new member would like my gift.” An uncertain expression crossed her smooth face. She blinked large, almond-shaped eyes full of worry.

Shalamar sensed her friend’s nervousness about the meeting that night, but she understood because she was uptight about it, too. They always took a chance going to such meetings, but the gatherings were necessary to find others like them. Besides, seeing Nahdia’s home was a treat in itself. Shalamar had always wanted a peek at the grand mansion that sat on Stallion Acres. She could only imagine the antiques the woman possessed.

“I wanted to bring something special,” she sighed, “but I was in a rush and didn’t have time to pick out anything truly unique.” Ebonee’s anxiety always revealed itself in her brilliant turquoise eyes which darkened until they became like two sapphires. Combined with her complexion, Ebonee looked more primal than uncertain, almost like a Siamese cat about to attack something.

“Nahdia will be thrilled with the cake. No one in our group would ever turn down a gift from Shock-Co-Late,” Shalamar replied, trying

to soothe her friend's fears. "Besides, Donna called earlier and said she's bringing a pumpkin roll from there, and I'm taking bonbons, so what are you worried about?" She laughed and jostled Ebonee's shoulder. "We all have nice gifts to give Nahdia."

"If only the public knew what was really in the treats," Ebonee said.

Shalamar smirked and shook her head. "Anyway, Donna said Nahdia wants us at her place by four o'clock."

Ebonee placed gold tissue paper over the gifts and put the lid on the box. "I wonder what Nahdia is like. She won't be offended we're bringing food as gifts, will she? Food might insult her since she's so wealthy. Do you think we should've all pitched in for a nice bouquet or even a statuette or something?"

"From what Donna told me, Nahdia is classy, but the most important thing is that she's eager to meet more people like us. And since she's rich, we wouldn't know what to buy that she doesn't already have."

"Yeah, you're right." Ebonee picked up her glass and sipped the blood-red liquor. "It's about time another member wants to join our group. Sometimes I wonder if we're the last. Our people are getting more difficult to find around here." She wrinkled her nose and looked into the wine flute as if the answers to the greatest mysteries resided there. "I hope we get the special drink tonight. I'm tired of swilling this shit."

Shaking her head, Shalamar snorted in disdain. "You're right. It's not often we get to share in a special drink, and as for finding new members, that's an understatement. So far, there have only been a hundred or so around Pittsburgh. And the thought of traveling abroad to find others doesn't appeal to me one bit. My traveling days are over."

"Yeah, I don't like the idea of going beyond Pittsburgh to find others either. At least we know it's safe here." Ebonee drained her

glass. “We better get moving. We might be late if we don’t beat the three o’clock shift change that hits Ochre Boulevard.”

“Shit! I forgot about that!” Shalamar picked up the box and led the way through her apartment. A rich display of antique Edwardian furniture and knickknacks placed in every available spot exuded clutter and money. She’d always enjoyed a prosperous lifestyle, but she had to admit she did have a weakness for rare Edwardian pieces. Pausing at the hall closet, Shalamar handed Ebonee her jacket.

“I’d love to wear my real fur coat tonight,” her friend stated.

Offering her a sympathetic look, Shalamar shrugged into her coat. “You never know, Ebonee. Maybe one day this world will accept us for who and what we really are.”

“Yeah, right.” Her friend snorted derisively. “Just like our own world accepted us.”

Shalamar let the matter drop. She grabbed her purse, and waited as Ebonee opened the door for her. Locking it behind them, Shalamar hooked her free arm through hers. Together, they hurried along the long, quiet corridor of the building to the foyer. Like sentries, potted palms stood between each door, and the occasional painting or lithograph of animals in the wilds decorated the walls.

“Did you ever rent those two top-floor apartments?” asked Ebonee. “One of the women I work with has a daughter who is recently divorced. She’s looking for a place to live. It’s just her and her five-year-old son.”

“An older couple came today to look at the smaller of the two, but I rented the bigger one to a handsome young hunk about three weeks ago.”

“Oh?” Ebonee arched a perfect black eyebrow. “Is he just handsome or is he a total beefcake?”

“I’d have to say beyond beefcake,” she answered with a girlish laugh. “His name is Drayden Parks. We haven’t fucked yet, but he seems interested in me. He’s tall, so he actually looks me in the eye,

and he's very blond. He has big blue eyes with thick, pale lashes, and he has the best ass I've ever seen!"

"Yummy!"

Shalamar's loud burst of laughter startled an old woman retrieving her mail from her foyer PO Box. "Honestly, Ebonee, you need to focus on other things besides sex."

"I can't help it." She shot a glance at the elderly lady, who exited in haste. "You know how much I like blonds, especially tall ones." Pausing, she waited until the woman was out of earshot. "I think I just scared the hell out of her."

"You scare the hell out of everyone."

Sadness settled over Ebonee's pretty features, and she sighed. "It's really difficult to blend in when you're female, look too exotic to pass as Asian or as any of the Indian tribes in the world, and you stand six and a half feet tall."

"I'm sorry." Guilt poked Shalamar's conscience. "If it helps, I'm tall, too." Her attempt at humor crashed and burned like the Hindenburg.

Ebonee pushed a lock of silky, raven-black hair out of her eyes. "You're still four inches shorter than me."

Blowing out an exasperated breath, she said, "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I understand that you feel like you don't blend with others. I only meant that you're right about your looks being extremely exotic, so you're bound to draw a lot of attention. And you turn every male head within ten blocks, which is a good thing—you should know that."

"Yeah, but you'd think people around here would be used to me by now."

Shalamar nudged Ebonee's arm. "Well, if they knew the truth, we'd both be in dire trouble, so you're just going to have to..."

"I'm just going to have to deal with it!" Ebonee shot her an irritated look. "I know, Shalamar, it's just too bad I can't change my looks."

Her friend's comment hit Shalamar's pissed-off button. "Never be sorry for who you are. You're one of the most beautiful women I know. I'd give one of my eyeteeth to look like you."

"If we were still in our homeland, I'd believe you, but we're here in," she swept her arm toward the big plate-glass windows, "glorious Pittsburgh," she finished, her tone heavy with disdain. "I want to go home, Shalamar, but I know we never will. I miss the jungles, the hunts, and the huge community banquets where there was plenty of food and drink for everyone. And I miss coupling under the night sky."

"We can't ever go back, so let's change the subject," Shalamar said somewhat abruptly. Ebonee's friendship meant the world to her, but her friend's nasty moods often tried Shalamar's patience, and the last thing Shalamar wanted was to be any more homesick than she already was. Tonight was for celebrating the others who wanted to make contact with them, raise their numbers, and ultimately step out of their minority status. It was not a night to placate Ebonee.

"All right." Ebonee smiled, and a little of her usual mischievousness nature sparkled in her eyes. "How about telling me more about this new, delicious-looking tenant?"

"Well, you know how I prefer tall, dark men, but there's something about this guy that makes me want to spread my legs for him or whatever he likes." She laughed along with Ebonee and pushed open the foyer door. "He's different from other men, but I haven't figured out how yet." Warm autumn air whipped her hair back and tugged at her jacket. "It looks like we won't need our coats right now, but I bet the temperature drops tonight."

Ebonee grabbed her arm and stopped her. "Are you saying this new guy might be a candidate for Transference?"

Shalamar shrugged. "Maybe."

"Oh, Shalamar, that would be so..." Ebonee glanced at her watch. "Oh, shit! Look at the time. We're going to be late. I hate driving

along Ochre Boulevard when the factory lets out for the three-to-eleven shift!”

They jogged around the side of the building to the parking lot. Shalamar hit the button on her key ring. The Jaguar’s lights blinked, followed by a chirping sound. They yanked open the doors and scrambled into the car. She handed Ebonee the box to hold it safely on her lap.

The tires squalled as Shalamar sped out of the lot. She made a hard right, shooting into traffic.

Next to her, Ebonee gasped and clutched the sides of her seat. “You’re going to get a ticket, Shalamar, or worse.”

“I doubt it.” She giggled. “I know the officer on duty during the afternoon rush hour. He’s one of us.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ebonee shoot her a startled look. She fought hard not to smile back at her.

“Really?” Ebonee said. “When did he come here?”

“He was transferred from another town.”

“I wonder just how many of us are in neighboring cities. There have to be more in the bigger cities, right?”

No words came to her. Finding others was rare enough, but Shalamar honestly didn’t know if such cities as Los Angeles or Miami would hold any more of their people than Pittsburgh did.

Ebonee sat quietly for a minute. Gradually, she relaxed as Shalamar maneuvered the Jaguar around two panel trucks, a rusty Acura, and a Dodge Ram, whose driver enjoyed tailgating. Finally, she asked, “Does this cop friend of yours know there’s a gathering date to be announced soon?”

“Certainly.” Shalamar laid her hand on the horn and didn’t let up until the moron in a souped-up Mustang allowed her to merge with the left lane. “How do you think Donna discovered Nahdia? He introduced them.”

“Oh.” A giggle burst from Ebonee.



Although Ochre Boulevard's speed limit was thirty-five miles per hour, Shalamar kept the speedometer pegged at fifty. As she passed the police cruiser parked beneath a billboard advertising Shock-Co-Late's delicious gourmet confections, the cop noticed her. She waved, and he tipped his hat.

Ebonee laughed harder. "I can only imagine how much everyone is cussing you right now because he didn't pull you over."

She grinned and cut off an old man driving an ancient pickup truck. At times Shalamar could be quite wicked, but only when absolutely necessary. Tonight, however, was a special occasion. The idea of fucking someone new, someone who would follow their sex pet customs, forced moisture to the crotch of her panties.

"Have you heard anything about possible dates for the gathering?"

Glancing at Ebonee, Shalamar shrugged. "No, nothing yet."

"Me either." A note of intrigue crept into Ebonee's voice. "I can't wait to find out this year's theme, though."

Smiling, Shalamar returned her attention to the congested boulevard. She hit the horn again and received the bird from a man who, judging by his impeccable suit and brand new Porsche, she guessed was an attorney or doctor. "All Donna said about it was that Nahdia will host the banquet in a couple of months, but other than that, Donna doesn't know much about the main course, the entertainment, outside guests, or anything else."

"I wonder if it's going to be another variety pack for the main course. I love it when various circles have those gatherings. And the desserts are always to die for!"

Ebonee's enthusiasm urged another laugh out of Shalamar. The woman sure liked to put food away, but it always amazed her how her friend stayed so slim and trim.

"I hope Nahdia splurges on a band. The last gathering was boring."

“What?” Even in her peripheral vision, Shalamar still caught Ebonee’s pout and struggled to keep the laughter out of her voice. “You don’t like classical music?”

“It’s all right to listen to while cooking or taking a bath, but when we’re amongst our peers I want to hear music that reminds me of home.”

“Yeah.” Shalamar nodded. “I have to agree with you.”

One left turn and another right later, an enormous plantation home in the distance grew larger as they approached it. Shalamar had always wondered about the place, and once Donna had given her the address, she couldn’t believe her luck. She was finally going to get to set foot inside the most talked about home in Pittsburgh.

“We’re going to Stallion Acres?”

The disbelief in Ebonee’s voice amused her. “That’s the address Donna gave me.” She slowed the car to turn onto the long lane.

“Un-fucking-believable!” her friend crowed. “Nahdia must be loaded! No, I take that back. She has to be filthy rich. Now I feel really stupid for buying a cake. I should’ve purchased baklava or maybe Boston Cream Pie!”

Ebonee was right. Nahdia had to have major greenbacks in order to purchase Stallion Acres and its amazing mansion. Many potential buyers had tried to buy the place, but the firm sixteen-million-dollar price tag always frustrated the hopefuls. It had been on the market for two years, and although the house and property were worth the price, if not more, Pittsburgh was a smaller city, and the surrounding area consisted of farmers. Although the city had spread out to the mansion’s original plantation land, the home still remained far enough away from the concrete hubbub to enjoy a quiet, semi-rural existence.

Gravel crunched under the Jaguar’s tires. Shalamar drove slowly so the Jag wouldn’t stir up too much dust and she could survey the property. The landscape boasted the deep green of aging grass and leaves about to pay homage to autumn. In a few more days, fall’s rich

colors would conquer summer's hold. In many ways, the area reminded her of home.

To their left, several head of horses grazed. The Jaguar drew the equines' attention. Two dozen quarter horses and Arabians galloped toward them, manes and tails flying behind them in banners of black, gray and white.

Shalamar couldn't help but wonder what sort of person Nahdia was. Someone with unlimited money could be quite an asset to their minority. It wasn't often a person from their homeland settled in Pittsburgh. How long had Nahdia been here? How many others did she know?

If the woman truly possessed the kind of money the mansion conveyed, she could open doors in a society that had always been locked to their people. Those in government offices were never immune to those who wore money as easily as the latest designer perfume.

Not that Shalamar wanted to draw attention to their presence, but it would be nice to have things a little easier. It would be nice, too, if there were more of their kind on Earth. Even more so, it would be a dream come true if she met her life mate, but Shalamar knew it was probably hopeless.

If their people could have a presence on Earth that meant something, oh the gatherings they would enjoy! The sex and food would be limitless.

"Any idea about tonight's main course?" Ebonee asked.

"No, but I bet it's great."

"I can't wait," she said.

"Neither can I, but I'm more interested in finding a sex pet." Just thinking about it caused heat to settle in Shalamar's pussy.

## Chapter Two

After parking the car in front of the mansion, Shalamar gathered her purse and the cake and mounted the dozen steps to the wrap-around porch with its huge, pristine white pillars. Flower boxes lined the railings, each one brimming with a riot of color. White wicker rockers and other patio furniture decorated the wide porch along with begonias, petunias, bleeding hearts, and bushy green asparagus ferns. At first glance Shalamar thought the owner had a green thumb. But as she admired the landscape and home, she quickly realized their distinct resemblance to Lavendanth which prompted a pang of homesickness.

Another vision assailed her. Shalamar halted at the bottom step. Her mate pulled her against his body, his arms snaking around her waist, hands palming her bare ass. He turned his head to the side before she could see his face and bit down on her neck. He growled possessively, his tongue flicking the skin around the wound.

Heat raced through Shalamar and spread into her pussy where hard, sharp tingles forced a whimper from her lips.

“What is wrong?” Ebonee placed her hand on Shalamar’s shoulder.

“I’m fine,” Shalamar replied. She gulped and then drew in a long, steadying breath to quell the lust rushing through her veins. “It’s just this place.” She hated lying to her friend, but until she could come to terms with what was happening to her and why, she couldn’t even begin to explain it to Ebonee. “It really makes me miss our home.”

“Yes, it does.” Ebonee let her gaze wander over the mansion. “This place is really taking shape. It looks like Nahdia has dumped a

fortune into the renovations, and the plants and flowers really do remind me of home too.”

Her friend’s voice snapped Shalamar out of the vision. She blinked, glancing around. Again, she reminded herself there weren’t any new males in the area. In fact, it had been so long since sensing any that she had given up hope of finding anyone. Oh, she’d had plenty of lovers, but a cock to scratch an itch was one thing. Finding her life mate was something altogether different.

Was it possible her intended mate might be in the area? No, to believe there were new Pantherians in the Pittsburgh area was preposterous. Shalamar would have sensed them, and so would her female friends like Ebonee.

Keeping her voice normal, Shalamar replied, “Someone definitely has mega bucks. Nahdia has to be—”

“Filthy stinking rich,” Ebonee said.

Shalamar laughed. “Exactly.”

The door swung open, and a man in a black, nondescript uniform, who Shalamar assumed to be Nahdia’s butler, stood in the threshold. “Ms. Shalamar and Ms. Ebonee, I presume?” he said.

“Yes,” they said simultaneously. Shalamar met Ebonee’s amused gaze and smiled.

“This way, please.” He turned and led the way into a brightly lit foyer.

Inside the manor, she clasped the cake box to her breasts as she gaped at the lush, expensive interior reeking of excellent taste and old money. Ebonee’s eyes looked like they would shoot out of their sockets at any moment. At the sight of a naked male servant wearing a copper collar, a little gasp of delight escaped her.

Excitement drifted into Shalamar’s heart. They had finally found someone who practiced the old ways.

The black-and-white marble floors, dark-colored wood, designer and antique furniture, and an original Van Gogh or Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec painting spoke volumes about Nahdia’s wealth and

obvious taste. Shalamar had already spotted a few rare Edwardian pieces that practically made her slobber. Her officer friend had certainly meant it when he said he'd found a member who practiced the old ways, not to mention someone who had more money than any of their kind could ever imagine.

They passed a strange ornament that framed the corridor. Constructed from pieces of gaudy colored glass and semi-precious gemstones, it ran from the ceiling, down one wall, across the floor with a clear, protective shield covering it, and then climbed the opposite wall and joined the ceiling again. Shalamar frowned at the odd box-shaped frame. Why would Nahdia possess something so gaudy amongst all her beautiful antiques and priceless paintings?

"Wait here, please." The butler hurried down a long hall.

"Check out that bizarre ornament," Ebonee whispered, her eyes round. "That has to be the ugliest thing I've ever seen."

"I know." Shalamar frowned at the contraption. "You don't think it could be a new version of a portal, do you?"

Ebonee shook her head adamantly. "No way. All the portals were destroyed, so how could that one possibly work?"

"Yeah, but it looks similar to one of the dimensional doors."

"How could Nahdia possibly have one?" Ebonee countered, laughing.

Shalamar shrugged. "I don't know, but this thing really makes me uneasy."

Strains of music reached them. Surprised to hear a homeland melody, Shalamar glanced around for the source of the music.

"Do you suppose Nahdia smuggled the instruments?" Ebonee whispered.

"I have no idea."

A door stood slightly ajar. Failure to ignore her curiosity often got Shalamar into trouble. The door beckoned, and she moved toward it.

"Shalamar, no!" Ebonee grabbed her hand, but Shalamar shook it off. "You don't know what or who is in there."

“Here, take this.” She handed Ebonee the box and turned toward the room again. Shalamar touched the cool door and pushed it open. Dark, earth-colored carpeting covered the floor. Potted palms lined the walls and a cluster of them stood around the tall, arched window letting in the early autumn light. Naked men and women wearing copper collars sat on chairs and stools with various homeland instruments in their hands. Three men clothed in black suits stood in strategic places. Shalamar then realized the students were divided into groups according to the instruments they were attempting to play. The music instructors murmured instructions to their pupils.

Shalamar hadn’t seen such instruments or heard their melodies since leaving her home years ago. Walking into the room, memories assailed her, ones of grand *soirées* full of beautiful music, coupling with the men of her choice, her comrades nearby, their cries of ecstasy loud in her ears, and the meals. Oh, the amazing meals her kind had enjoyed. Longing stirred within her, and a throbbing began between her legs. Her nostrils flared. The teachers were from her homeland too. Had Nahdia brought them with her? Was there now a new scent-masking agent that prevented them from detecting those from their homeland? If so, perhaps they had been in Pittsburgh the entire time assimilating, blending. That would mean there was more of their kind here than she first thought.

“Shalamar?”

With surprise, her new hunky blond tenant looked up at her from where he sat on a bench playing one of the instruments. His gorgeous blue eyes shone with pleasure. A collar glimmered around his neck. Shalamar smiled. Oh, this had definite possibilities.

“Drayden?”

“What are you doing here?” he whispered.

“I was invited,” Shalamar whispered back. “What are you doing here,” she motioned, indicating his nudity, “like this?”

“It pays well,” he said. “The woman who owns this mansion threw in an extra five hundred dollars if we’d learn to play these

instruments. If we play well, we each get one thousand dollars when she has that big banquet she's been planning."

"Really?" Her gaze wandered over his fine physique. There was something different about Drayden. She'd sensed it the day she'd showed him the apartment and every time they bumped into one another in the halls or the elevator, but Shalamar could never determine what it was. "Did she fill you in on what else you'll be required to do?"

He smiled, and his face lit up. She hated to admit it, but Drayden was more than handsome. He exuded virility. Nodding, he said, "The matter did come up. As long as the sex is safe, I don't have a problem with it."

"Come on, Shalamar," Ebonee whispered loudly from the hall.

Their voices drew the attention of one of the instructors, who motioned to the other two. Silence fell over the room.

"How dare you interrupt our lessons," the first one said. "I will not have..." He sniffed the air. A look of awe spread over his smooth face, and he crossed the room to stand a couple of feet away from Shalamar. The teacher tipped his head back slightly and sniffed again. "My deepest apologies," he said. "I had no idea."

"It's quite all right," Shalamar replied, not wanting to draw any additional attention. Her heart flailed painfully. How the hell did he know? She always took great pains to camouflage her essence with musk-laden perfumes, bath gels and body oils.

He returned to the other instructors and mumbled something she couldn't quite catch. The music teachers gathered their attaché cases and, murmuring apologies as they strode out, left the students to entertain themselves. Shalamar sensed he'd told the others about who she may be. Inwardly, she shivered, praying she was wrong.

Ebonee leaned through the door. "I don't know what you just did, but I hope it doesn't piss off Nahdia," she said.

"They knew me." Shalamar shot her a worried glance.



Her eyes widened. “Maybe we should make an excuse and leave. You shouldn’t put yourself in any unnecessary danger.”

Shalamar shook her head. “No, let’s play this out. We’re obviously here for more than getting to know others like us, and if we leave unexpectedly, it will draw more attention than if we just play it cool.” Sure that no one was paying attention to them, she looked at Drayden and asked, “Do you have a room here for your sexual duties?”

“Yeah, why?” He placed the long, curled-stringed instrument in the leather bag at his feet.

“I’d like to use it,” she stated.

“Shalamar?” Ebonee said, flabbergasted. “You can’t! You mustn’t!” She lowered her voice. “If anyone suspects who you are, you’ll be in danger!”

“If Nahdia is truly from our homeland, then it will please her.”

“I don’t care if what you’re about to do is customary,” Ebonee straightened, placing both fists on her slender hips, “you shouldn’t take such risks. We don’t know who Nahdia is other than she’s one of us.” Her gaze briefly flitted over the other men and women. “Nahdia might be one from our homeland, but you still need to be careful.”

“I am careful,” Shalamar said. “And if Nahdia isn’t what she’s making herself out to be, there will be consequences,” she lowered her voice and stared directly into Ebonee’s eyes, “especially if it turns out that square, mirrored thing in the corridor is what I think it is.”

Ebonee shook her head. “You shouldn’t do this!”

“Trust me, Ebonee.” Shalamar curbed her irritation. “Have I ever failed you?”

“No, but—”

“Then let’s play by customary rules and see where this goes.” She looked at Drayden. “Lead the way.” The throbbing in Shalamar’s pussy grew stronger. Just the thought of following his tight ass through the mansion was enough to make her whimper with longing.

“Do you want the leash?” Drayden asked, chuckling.

“Sure, why not?” she replied.

It had been a long time since she had practiced foreplay and sex in the traditional manner. However, the way he picked up the leash draped over the back of the chair told her he didn't take any of the customs seriously. How could he? To Drayden, it was merely role playing. He handed the leash to Shalamar, and she clipped it on the back of his collar.

Shalamar smoothed her hand over one of his buttocks. “Let's see if you're as good as you portray yourself to be.”

He offered her another one of his award-winning smiles and led her out the door, past Ebonee, whose worry surrounded her in an odiferous cloud, and down the corridor, her boot heels clicking on the marble floor. For a second time, Shalamar's gaze landed on the gigantic, square frame.

“Ms. Ebonee?” Shalamar heard the butler say as Drayden turned up the wide, twisting staircase.

Tugging on the leash, she said, “Slow down.”

“Apologies,” Drayden said in the traditional way and waited until the leash slackened.

“I'll be alone for now,” Ebonee said, her voice carrying up the stairs. “Ms. Shalamar has decided to sample the pets.”

“I see,” the butler replied. “Mistress Nahdia is waiting in the dining room.”

Nahdia could wait. Right now Shalamar wanted Drayden between her legs, his cock pummeling her slick, eager pussy. She shivered in anticipation, her breathing ragged.

Upstairs, Drayden led her alongside the balustrade overlooking the magnificent foyer. He turned right down a hall lined in dark green carpet that felt like it must be two inches thick. Oh, to be rich and enjoy such frivolities again. Shalamar's finances allowed her to live comfortably, but Nahdia's mansion emanated wealth so strongly the walls practically shouted the word. Shalamar had lived in a grand

manor once, but as she gazed at the grandeur around her, she felt like that part of her life had been eons ago.

Her attention shifted from the décor to Drayden's ass. She'd seen him move in a Bowflex machine plus several other pieces of fitness equipment when he'd moved in to her apartment building. Judging by the way his buttocks and thighs flexed as he walked, Shalamar figured he must work out on the machine seven days a week. She hoped his performance matched his physique. His broad shoulders rippled with muscles, but he wasn't overly pumped. She liked ripped guys, but didn't care for the muscle-man look, which always struck her as abnormal and sometimes even comical. It had always been her experience that men with king-size muscles usually possessed a cock the equivalent of a pack of gum.

She grinned. *Wrigley's anyone?*

"This one's mine," Drayden announced and halted at a door on the right.

Shalamar pulled on his leash. As she'd expected, he bowed and opened the door, allowing her to enter first.

Her jaw dropped. The room looked like a scene transported from home. Fern fronds covered the carpet. Potted palms, tall ferns, small trees with tough, rubbery leaves, and vines filled the room. A dais took up the center of the floor with green and brown cushions on it, laying across one another and providing a casual, fun-style bed. She dropped Drayden's leash, walked over, and picked up one of the pillows, squeezing and smelling it. *Real feathers.*

On the walls, forest-green leaf patterns twisted to a ceiling painted to resemble a sky with cirrus clouds. Curious, Shalamar snapped off the main light and drew the blinds on the lone window. In seconds, an uncharted, yet familiar star constellation appeared on the darkened ceiling. Even the deep vermilion aura of their universe had been artfully brushed in. *How clever!*

"Are all the rooms like this?" she asked.

“Each room is the same design, but with variations,” he replied, head bowed, leash dangling down his back and past his spread legs as if it were a leather tail.

She smirked at the image he presented. How fitting and erotic.

“A few are more flowery than others,” he added. “Personally, I prefer the rooms with forest themes.”

The ceiling continued to captivate her. In their home world, they would lie outside at night and watch planets rotate around other worlds, study the stars in all their fiery brilliance, and witness supernovas in far-off galaxies, their shimmering auras similar to Earth’s firework displays.

Sighing and missing her homeland even more, Shalamar opened the blinds again and forced the memories of what was lost to the back of her mind. The dais drew her attention a second time. She crossed the room, unbuttoning her blouse, and paused long enough to unhook Drayden’s leash.

“Dominant or submissive?” Drayden asked.

“Just how well are you trained?”

“Meaning?”

“Do you just follow the rules and do you know why the few who come here practice these sexual rituals?”

“I’m not naïve, Shalamar.” Now he smirked at her.

Again, she sensed something a little off about the man. With her nose in the air, she inhaled.

“If I offend,” he said, “I apologize. Mistress Nahdia doesn’t allow anyone to wear cologne or perfume.”

She laughed. “You don’t smell bad.”

He walked toward her, muscles flexing, his cock hardening. Shalamar gaped at him. How dare he not follow the rules! She was the one who would call him to her. However, something about the way Drayden moved and the look in his eyes forced her to keep quiet. Each step he took, the way he appraised her and the slight tip of his

head were almost predatory. He fascinated Shalamar, but why? What made him so different from her other lovers?

Her eyes widened. *Unless he was of the panther persuasion.* Her heartbeat quickened at the thought.

“I’m betting,” he said, “you’re looking for someone different, and I’m also willing to bet I’ve found the woman I’ve been hunting for, too.”

“What are you talking about?” The tremor that began in Shalamar’s feet soon traveled up into her body and settled in her core. It both fascinated and terrified her that Drayden affected not only her physical self, but her psyche as well.

“Remove your skirt,” he said. “Turn around and bend over *now*.”

Anger sliced through Shalamar. “I will not!”

Drayden grabbed her, spinning her around and throwing her toward the dais so fast Shalamar gasped and threw her hands out to catch herself. He wasn’t rough, just demanding. However, he was the one who was supposed to fulfill *her* fantasies and sate *her* sexual appetite, not the other way around. Regardless, once her forearms hit the cushions, her anger and surprise transformed into desire so intense it shot through her body in the form of a molten bullet.

With her ass in the air, Shalamar struggled to get up, but Drayden quickly moved behind her, his hands grasping her hips, fingers biting into her flesh. His arousal obvious, it pressed against the crack of her ass. She bit down on her lip to keep from whimpering. Desire roared through her, and her skin prickled. Frightened of the sensation, Shalamar squelched it, forced it back down somewhere safe. A quick screw or temporary lover had never affected her like this before.

He pushed Shalamar’s skirt up over her hips. Cool air kissed her skin.

“Nice thong,” said Drayden. “So you like animal prints, eh? Funny, I do, too.” He slipped his fingers under it and gently pulled it out as his hand slid down her ass. He palmed her crotch. “Ah, very

hot.” Drayden ripped the thong free, and she jumped, sucking in a startled breath. “Do you want me?”

Shalamar kept biting her lip, kept fighting the tingles that raised the hair along her body.

He slapped one of her butt cheeks. It surprised her, but she didn’t cry out. Need coursed through every vein, every nerve ending. She wanted him badly, but she would never tell him that. No, she couldn’t. Shalamar coupled with men who she found fitting or that one special male who could—no, it couldn’t be Drayden! It just didn’t make sense for it to be him.

He curled his fingers against her pussy and stroked her folds. Desire raced to her loins and pooled there. The pain in Shalamar’s lip grew unbearable. If she bit it any harder, she’d bite clean through it.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” Drayden asked, his voice a throaty purr.

“You are to serve *me*,” she said as evenly as she could, her heartbeat thundering in her ears. She tried to act nonchalant, but he didn’t seem to believe any of it.

“You can’t fool me. You want me all right. You want me thrusting in your pussy. And you want my seed to bathe your womb,” he said.

*How could he know what her visions had shown her?*

Drayden slipped a finger inside her, and she nearly cried out. Flicking the walls of her pussy, he slid another digit in to join it. “Shalamar, do you want me to fuck you?”

“I am the one who will be dominant,” she breathed, trying not to moan. Oh, who was she kidding? In this position, her ass in the air, his fingers inside her, his cock just inches from filling her up, it wouldn’t take much more for Shalamar to give in. “You are to serve me,” she repeated more firmly.

“Why?”

Shalamar frowned. He didn't know her real identity, so she couldn't explain it. And the last thing she wanted to do was cause pandemonium or frighten the shit out of the guy.

Drayden leaned over her, his breath against her ear. "Shalamar? Are you going to answer me?"

"Because there are," she gulped as the coil inside her tightened, "rules to follow." Shalamar heard the tremor in her voice and mentally cursed it.

"The only rules we have to follow are our own." Drayden's fingers left her pussy, and she nearly wept with disappointment. Before she could move, he pressed the tip of his cock against her opening. "I *will* have you," he said, "and no matter how much you deny it, I sense who you are. You are now mine."

*His?* She belonged only to her mate. He had no right to claim her.

Before Shalamar could speak or move, he penetrated her. The sensation of his cock sliding into her nearly rocketed her over the edge. No pack of Wrigley's there, oh no. Spots flitted in front of Shalamar's eyes, the feeling of him joined with her body so glorious that her arms gave out and she flopped, facedown, on the plush cushions, his form pinning her.

At that moment, Shalamar knew she could die that way and she wouldn't give a shit.

## Chapter Three

With her legs splayed, Drayden moved against Shalamar, his cock seated deep inside her vagina. If she closed her eyes, she could almost convince herself she was back in her homeland, in the forest.

“Those thigh-high boots of yours are fucking sexy,” he said into her ear.

“What about safe sex?” she asked. But her body screamed he was bareback and felt too good to worry about it. What if she became pregnant? Shalamar mused. Children with non-mates were forbidden. However, they weren’t in their home world anymore either, so did it really matter?

“You’re *mine*.” Drayden raised his hips, his cock sliding out of her to tease the edges of her cunt. “Because of that, we don’t need to practice safe sex.”

She didn’t want to hear or believe him, but the heat spreading through her abdomen silenced any fears of offspring or disease. Drayden thrust gently, just enough for the head of his cock to edge all the way in, but he slowly pulled it out again. Closing her eyes, bright pinpoints of light danced behind her lids. The prickles returned, and Shalamar knew if he kept tormenting her in this fashion, she wouldn’t be able to hold the orgasm off any longer, and she wasn’t so sure she wanted to.

He pushed into her and lay still until she adjusted to his size and his body weight. “I claim you,” he said.

“You can’t,” Shalamar gasped. “It’s not your right.”

“Yes, it is. You are now mine. I’ve searched a long time for a mate, and now I’ve finally found you.”



“Mate? I don’t believe you.” Her pussy throbbed, her body hummed with sensation, and any minute now, Shalamar would shirk every misgiving and secret she had for just a few moments of pure, raw sex.

He withdrew from her. The cry of distaste that flew from her lips urged a chuckle from him. He moved so quickly it surprised her. Rolling Shalamar onto her back, Drayden settled between her thighs, popped the front clasp on her bra and entered her again. He shifted positions, raising himself until he knelt with her ass against his crotch. He drew her legs up so that the backs of them lay over his thighs and she could rest her boot heels on the tops of his calves. Desire arrowed through Shalamar so hard she moaned. When she wanted to be submissive, this was her favorite position. She loved looking at the rapturous expressions on her lovers’ faces, enjoyed watching the muscles work in their chests, abdomens and arms as they thrust into her over and over.

Shalamar looked up at Drayden. His hands gripped her hips, a storm cloud of lust in his eyes. The coil inside her wound tighter, and for an instant, she struggled with herself, fearing she would climax. A stinging sensation passed along her skin, and she battled harder with her body. The pending orgasm was one thing, but the intense electrical itching was something she *had* to control. There was no other choice, but the more Drayden tantalized her flesh, the harder it was for her to fight the transformation.

“I know what you are, Shalamar,” he said and pushed deeper into her until the root of him snuggled tightly against her mound. “I smell it. You’re the one I’ve been looking for.”

She opened her eyes, and shock flowed through her. At first, Shalamar thought she was so delirious with sexual energy she’d imagined his transformation. Drayden began to change, his body morphing. Short, velvety, rust-colored hair sprouted on his face. His nose and mouth broadened into a muzzle, the nostrils curling into that of a big cat’s. Cropped red fur appeared along his arms, grew out on

his chest, shoulders, and down along his sides to his thighs where her hands bit into them, drawing him closer. Blinking, she realized that she had, indeed, witnessed his change, but he wasn't a true shifter. No, Drayden Parks was something different, but yet she still smelled the essence of her home world in his pheromones.

"What are you?" Shalamar questioned. Although the change surprised her, she still wanted him. Oh, how she wanted him!

He thrust harder, filling her and nudging the opening to her womb. He felt so good, so right. Since Shalamar had fled the home world, she'd been searching for her mate, but none of the homeland males in the area were adequate, and human males were only good for sex. She had to find that one true homelander, her life mate who was destined for her. Together, they were to return to Lavendanth and take it back from those who had conquered it. Well, that was the legend, but Shalamar had since learned that legends were full of shit.

*So, who or what exactly was Drayden Parks?*

He began pounding into her. The knot of sensation inside her grew tighter. She met each of Drayden's thrusts with an upward motion of her hips, each movement sending a comet of pleasure straight to her core. He released her hips and fondled her breasts, his fingers kneading gently. Groaning, she arched her ass higher, determined to match his escalating pace.

"Oh," she said. "Yes, more!"

"You're," he grunted, pumping harder, "mine, Shalamar. You will remain mine, forever."

"Please, just fuck me." She let go of his thighs and flung her arms over her head. "More. Harder."

He growled low in his throat. The muscles in his chest flexed and tensed. His hips drove into hers over and over.

"Yes!" Shalamar breathed.

She didn't know how or why, but she knew Drayden was right. No male had ever affected her body like this, no male had ever made her want to be totally subservient and just enjoy his cock piercing her

body, their juices mingling, breathing harsh, bodies slick with sweat. He could fuck her for all eternity and she would be a willing participant, allowing him to have his way with her. Any position, any place, any time as long as he just fucked her.

He kept pummeling her, and as the spring inside Shalamar wound increasingly tighter, she sensed Drayden was about to reach his jump-off point too.

“I’m yours,” she shouted and meant it.

The orgasm crashed over her in an avalanche of ecstasy so intense it prompted her to transform, something she’d never done during sex, not even with one of her own race, since fleeing her home. The stinging that pebbled her skin only heightened her climax. Shalamar screamed, grinding and bucking against Drayden. Somehow, she managed to keep enough of her sanity to restrain herself from shifting into full Pantherian form. As tremors passed over her body, Drayden let out a cat-like howl that curled her toes. The sound prompted a mini orgasm to course through her. She sighed contentedly, her pussy and everything around her thighs, abdomen and ass throbbing with afterglow.

He collapsed on top of her. Shalamar concentrated on maintaining her half-changed form. Drayden hadn’t shifted completely, and she sensed it was because he couldn’t. The pheromones wafting off of him were half shape-changer, half-human.

He was a true Transfer.

But how was that possible? True Transfers were a hoax, a myth, weren’t they?

Drayden stared down at Shalamar, his forearms braced on either side of her head. “My mother told me about your family,” he said, “but I never dreamed I’d actually meet a member of it, especially you, the Pantherian Heir. Nor did I think we’d be life mates. Your lavender color is lovelier than my mother described.”

“Your mother told you about my family?” Surprised, she swiped her paw-hand over her face.

He nodded. “She was an Azure, but when she mated with a Red and found out she’d conceived, she had to flee the homeland.”

“Before someone found out and killed her for birthing a Lavender to add to my family,” she supplied.

“Yes.”

“But you’re not a Lavender.” Her gaze wandered over him. “You took after your sire.”

He slid out of her and lay alongside her body, his arm thrown possessively over her hips, his gaze direct but full of triumph, contentment and curiosity.

“You’re half human, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“But how is that possible?”

“My sire was human with bloodlines that reached back to the birth of your family.”

As if zapped with a bolt of electricity, she sat up and twisted around, drawing her legs to one side. “You lie!”

“Shalamar, you know humans and shape-changers once shared the same world. My father was the last of the human race on Lavendanth.”

“No, I don’t believe you.” She shook her head.

Was it possible that Drayden was the key to bringing humans and Pantherians together again through mating with her? The implications were too numerous to ponder. She stared into his eyes, searching for answers, and saw only sincerity within them. Drayden caressed her cheek with the backsides of his fingers, a soft smile on his lips. She sensed he spoke the truth. She didn’t know how or why, but the legends of her world resided in this one half human, half shifter who had become her mate.

“So, you took a job here at Stallion Acres thinking you’d find a mate?”

He nodded. “And I felt drawn to your apartment building. *You* were drawing me. I sensed something whenever we spoke, whenever

our gazes met, but until today, I wasn't sure what it was." He grinned. "Now I do, and so do you."

"But how did your father avoid the others?" She closed her eyes as his fingers glided over her skin and down along her throat. "Why was he the last?"

"My father's family was slaughtered. A Noir found my mother hiding, took pity on her, and told her to flee."

"But Noirs are those who hunt us, who fear the return of the Lavenders and the legend that the human race will return through us." This was all too much for Shalamar to comprehend. She had seen her family killed. She'd fled with the thousands who had escaped to other worlds and had been here on Earth for years. However, those days of her homeland, although still fresh in her mind regardless of time's passage, were dreamlike, too. "Your mother must have fled here the same time I did."

"You've been here too long, Shalamar. You sound as though you've convinced yourself everything about your past is a fairy tale. Have you assimilated to this world?"

His disappointed tone chastised her. Shalamar bared her fangs at him, hissing. "Do not shame me into believing you. I know my heritage."

Drayden frowned and dropped his hand to his side. He studied her hard, his eyes deepening to a steely blue. "But you thought you'd never be reminded of it again, didn't you?"

Looking away, she stared at the tall, green potted palm in the corner that seemed like one of Lavendanth's trees. Her heart flailed so hard she saw spots. Shalamar didn't want to remember. It hurt too much. A lump formed in her throat, threatening to choke her.

"Yes," she replied dully. "I thought Lavendanth was forever a distant memory. I was so intent on finding others like us that it never occurred to me my past might actually return to haunt me."

"You are royalty, Shalamar." Awe resided in Drayden's voice. "It is your duty to go back to Lavendanth."

Perplexed, she snapped her gaze around to meet his. “How? No portals were brought to this world.” She remembered her suspicions about the gaudy contraption downstairs, but dismissed the notion. Nahdia would be insane to have such a thing in her home. If the Noirs found their way through it, Nahdia would be killed. “When the Noirs took over, they were the only ones permitted to own or use portals. Besides, even if there had been any portals left, most of us escaped so quickly there was no time to transport something so fragile. ”

He studied her carefully for a long moment. Finally, he sighed and said, “There has to be a way.”

“I don’t know that I want to go back.”

This time he gaped at her. “Not go back to what is rightfully yours? It’s our destiny to return Lavendanth to the world it once was. Through us, humans and shifters will unite and be one race again.” He took her paw-hand, rubbing the pads of his against the pads of hers, awakening desire in Shalamar again.

She gulped and ignored the need throbbing in her pussy again. “Wow, your mother really lathered it on thick, didn’t she?”

A shadow crossed his face. Even in half-panther form, Drayden was still handsome.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That was callous of me.”

“My mother told me every detail of Lavendanth in the hopes I’d find my life mate and be able to return to the homeland,” he said, his gaze distant. “Little did she know that my destined mate would be the Pantherian Heir of the Lavender Family.”

“Where is your mother now?”

The shadow returned to his features, and pain settled in his bright blue eyes. “She was in the mountains on vacation with her human lover,” Drayden began. “She snuck out early one morning to shift and hunt. Not realizing her lover had awakened and was sitting on the porch drinking coffee, she entered the cabin’s yard still in panther form. Her lover shot her before she could change back.”

She brushed the hair from his eyes and caressed his cheek. “How horrible.”

“As she changed back into her human form, it terrified her lover, so he shot her again to make sure she did die.”

“When did it happen?”

“Two years ago.” He snorted cynically. “She was so close to meeting you. If only her lover hadn’t been frightened and had given her a chance.”

“I am so sorry.” The memory of the music instructor rose in Shalamar’s mind. Unease settled over her. “Drayden, the music teachers downstairs knew me. How is that possible? Only my mate would be able to smell who I really am over the musky aromas I bathe in and spray upon me and my clothes, but,” she glanced at him to convey her worry, “they *knew*, Drayden. That’s why they excused themselves so quickly.”

“I don’t know.” He pondered the notion for a moment. “It is odd. I knew something was different about you, but you’re right about the musky perfumes. I didn’t truly know who you were until you were aroused.”

“Maybe it’s nothing.” She shrugged. “Regardless, I’m uneasy about it.”

He looked at her, and his expression brightened. “We’ll just be careful. Keep our eyes open and follow our instincts just in case.”

She nodded.

“So,” he kissed her, “should I move my things into your place?”

Drayden pulled Shalamar down next to him and held her as she changed back into her human form. Her pale purple fur with its dark violet stripes grew softer and thinner until nothing but smooth, pale skin remained. Her hands resumed their *Homo sapien* form complete with fingers and thumbs. Her tail disappeared along with her pointed ears, and her muzzle and fangs morphed back into that of a Caucasian woman’s. Smiling, Drayden reverted to his human form, too.

“Yes.” Shalamar snuggled into his arms. “Start moving in tonight or tomorrow morning. It doesn’t matter how much I may fight it, I now know we are life mates.”

His laughter rumbled in her ear. “We are soul-mated now, Shalamar.” He nuzzled her neck, and her flesh pebbled in response.

“I’ll have to get rid of some of my antiques to make room for your things, or maybe I can put some of them in storage.” She thought about it a moment and added, “Perhaps we can put some of mine and some of yours in the attic instead.”

“Aren’t you expected downstairs?” he asked.

Her eyes widened. “Shit! I forgot.” She shoved him over, and he slid off the cushions on to the floor, his chuckles warming her. “See what you do to me?”

“Yes,” he said, “I do, and it pleases me immensely.”



## Chapter Four

Quickly, Shalamar dressed and straightened her clothes. “I’ll clip the leash on you and show Nahdia that I’ve chosen you as my sex pet for tonight.”

“Sounds good to me.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Laughing, she opened the door and led him into the hall and back downstairs. She glanced quickly at the square apparatus in the corridor. Its vivid colors were almost garish, the stones and glass shining brightly in the lights. What if that thing truly was a portal? The very idea forced a tremor of fear through Shalamar.

“Ah, Ms. Shalamar,” the butler said, snaring her attention. He met them in the foyer. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Oh, yes.” She shook away her unease. “I am very pleased with Mistress Nahdia’s stock.”

He smiled, his white mustache stretching. “Good, good. She will be very happy to hear that.” He turned toward the corridor he’d led her and Ebonee down earlier. “This way, please. The mistress awaits you in the dining room.” Upon reaching a massive set of double doors constructed from a deep red wood, the butler pushed them open, stepped across the threshold, and announced, “Mistress Nahdia, I present Ms. Shalamar and her chosen pet.”

“Send them in, Stanwick,” a sultry voice called out.

As Shalamar tugged Drayden along behind her, she strode into a lavish dining room. The butler, Stanwick, had called it a dining room, but in truth, it looked more like a feasting hall. She hadn’t seen anything like it since leaving her grand manor on Lavendanth. Tapestries hung on the walls, each one depicting a spectacular world

that humans would believe were nothing more than a fantasy. However, those of Lavendanth would know the pictures embroidered on them told of a bygone era of a world dominated by Noirs. Her gaze wandered over their rich detail and vivid colors. So much history hung on the walls, history that had been destroyed because the Noirs believed they were a more intelligent and dominant race. Sadly, Earth was a mirror world in many respects except that humans feared anything they didn't understand, such as shifters.

In the back of the chamber, heavy red velvet cloaked a round dais used for entertainment. Two massive crystal chandeliers hung over each end of a long table fashioned from a glowing, ruby-red wood. Guests surrounded the table, including Ebonee and Donna. A menagerie of foods and bottles of thick red wine covered its surface. The aromas of both cooked and raw meat and various edible or drinkable accompaniments awakened the hunger in Shalamar's belly. Her senses sharpened. She hadn't eaten since lunch.

At the head of the table, a raven-haired woman stood and smiled at Shalamar. "I see you've found a pet for the evening!" The smile on her face looked so wide it made Shalamar's jaws ache in response. Everything from the woman's white silk dress, diamond choker and earrings screamed rich, powerful seductress. "I'm so glad you felt comfortable practicing the customs of our homeland. Poor Ebonee," she threw a glance toward Shalamar's friend and clicked her tongue, "worried herself silly that I'd be upset. I plied her with a thick red, so she's mellowed out quite a bit."

Ebonee raised a crystal goblet full of crimson drink and winked.

Laughter bubbled from Nahdia. "I want to thank you and Ebonee for the lovely gifts from Shock-Co-Late'. I order so many things from there. If only the humans knew the establishment is owned and managed by a shifter, eh? They would curl up and die if they knew, too, that they were eating confections and candies made from meat and blood!" More of her laughter swirled through the chamber.

For some odd reason, Shalamar had the overwhelming urge to hiss and bare her claws at their hostess.

“Come.” Nahdia motioned her closer. “Sit next to me. Ebonee has told me much about you. I hear you own a network of nice apartment complexes.”

The urge to flee assailed Shalamar. Sniffing, she detected not only the rich foods and drinks, but an array of anger, resentment, fear and worry that wafted off the other shifters. She had expected only the four of them and possibly some pets, but several unfamiliar faces looked back at her. Donna smiled reassuringly, but Shalamar had known her for only a couple of months. As a Leopard, other shifters could easily spot Donna with her pale brown hair that looked as if she’d gone to a salon to have spots frosted in it. In this world, her telltale hair seemed like a cool coloring technique.

Next to Donna, three men and one woman lined the right side of the table. One’s hair looked as red as a beaten ass. Undoubtedly a Red, Shalamar wondered if he could smell the same essence on Drayden. The two women, who sat side by side, were both Teals, perhaps Tigers, but definitely siblings because their odors smelled very similar.

As Shalamar led Drayden to her proffered chair, she perused the occupants on the left side where she was to sit. Ebonee would sit next to her. Poor Ebonee. As a Sable, she was considered a commoner amongst their kind. Drayden had a point. It would be nice if their world could be united with humans so no one color was revered or preferred over another, but until humans learned the same acceptance, Shalamar knew it was a dream. Next to her good friend sat a female Golden Tigress, an Orange male, probably a Tabby, and a Red female, who, by her aroma, was pregnant by the Orange male.

Two pets stood behind the sibling Teals, so Shalamar didn’t worry so much about having Drayden with her. Although Shalamar choosing a sex pet had pleased Nahdia, one couldn’t be too careful in

this world. She sat down and fastened the end of his leash to her left wrist.

Nahdia settled in her chair. The aroma of musk drifted over Shalamar. “Fill our guest a glass of thick red,” she called.

A human maid appeared, picked up a crystal decanter and hurried to Shalamar’s side to fill the goblet next to her plate.

“Please,” said Nahdia, “help yourself to whatever you desire, Shalamar. We’ve only just begun with the first course. Have a before-supper parfait. The recipe is light and airy, so it won’t fill you up.”

Beginning to relax, Shalamar chose a parfait made with congealed blood, chocolate, and minced veal and topped with whipped cream blended with just enough steak seasonings that it had a spicy flavor. It melted on her tongue. She hadn’t had fare like this since living in her father’s manor. It was almost as good as the sex she’d had with Drayden—almost. Next, she picked up a serving fork, stabbed two slices of raw meat, and placed them on her plate. Mountain oysters, sautéed chicken gizzards, and mashed potatoes made with blood broth joined the chunks of steak on her dish. *Ah...heaven*. Shalamar hadn’t bothered to eat like this for quite some time. Too many visits to the butcher only aroused suspicion amongst humans.

“Madam?” the maid asked in a heavy Australian accent.

Shalamar looked up at her. The human held out frozen cubes of blood. Shalamar nodded. The maid dropped half a dozen into her goblet to chill the blood wine.

“So,” said Nahdia as they ate, “how many apartment complexes do you own?”

“Six,” Shalamar replied. The maid and several others appeared to gather their dirty dishes. Once they had left, she said, “I also have an interest in rare Edwardian antiques. You have several amazing pieces in your home.”

Nahdia beamed at her. “Thank you. It has taken me many years to acquire them.”

At that moment, Shalamar realized that Nahdia was a Platinum, a very rare race of panther shifters. It wasn't that they were of royal bloodline but that there were just few of them. The light struck her hostess's hair just right so that she noticed the tiniest of root growth. Nahdia dyed her hair black. The faint odor of musk tantalized Shalamar's senses again, and another realization hit her. Nahdia was disguising her odor, too. She didn't want others to know she was a Platinum, but why?

Oh, no. Not one of them! The world already had enough power-hungry idiots in it.

Why would she want to portray herself as a Noir? Suddenly Shalamar's suspicions about the gaudy thing in the main hall seemed very possible, but at the same time, it didn't make sense either. If the Noirs knew that the dimensional door existed, every shifter on Earth was in grave danger. Why would Nahdia want to take such a chance? Unease tickled Shalamar's senses, but she pushed it to the back of her mind. The maids entered the dining hall again with silver platters laden with fresh lamb, veal, and more exotic dishes of meat such as chilled monkey brains, roasted parrot breast, and one of Shalamar's favorites, shark steaks. Her salivary glands worked overtime at the array of treats prepared just for carnivores. Several of the guests murmured their approval.

"Please, Mistress Nahdia," said one of the Teals, "what is the main course tonight?"

Nahdia offered her another one of her jaw-aching smiles. "It's a surprise. I want to see the look on everyone's face when it is announced."

The Teal squirmed in her seat and licked her lips in anticipation. Her fangs showed. Embarrassed, she covered her mouth with one hand.

Laughing, Nahdia waved her hand in a dismissive manner. "Oh, don't hide what you are, my dear. We're all part of the same world, and the humans serving us will say nothing about who and what we

are.” She cast a stern glance across the room at the maids and servers moving about the guests as they tended to everyone’s needs. “For they know what will happen to them if they should reveal our secret, not to mention they’re paid extremely well.”

“Don’t you feel you’re taking a chance by having humans here with us?” asked Donna.

“Not at all. What makes us any different from the vampires that wander amongst them? At least our ability to shape shift is natural instead of the unholy.”

Murmurs of approval swept the table.

“What about you, Shalamar?” asked Nahdia.

“Me?” Warm skin pressed against Shalamar’s side. Vibes of concern wafted off of Drayden. She studied Nahdia’s golden eyes and suppressed a shiver of uncertainty. “What about me?”

The woman smiled patiently. “How do you feel about humans and shape-changers mingling in this world?”

Shit. This was not a conversation she wanted to be a part of.

“Well, I’m not sure.” Shalamar set down her fork and picked up the goblet by her plate. “I guess it would depend on the world itself and the people in it.”

“How so?” the woman pressed, her tone urging the fur to appear on Shalamar’s neck.

“We need to ask ourselves questions. One important question is if this world is really ready for us. The humans are aware of vampires, but they ignore what they know lurks in the night.” Shalamar paused to sip some of her drink. “If humans say something doesn’t exist, then it’s a myth, a fairytale. And the humans who do believe in vampires fear them or hunt them.”

“But we could be the hunters,” Nahdia replied, “the powerful, the revered.”

Inwardly, Shalamar cringed. Not this, not again.

“You see,” said Nahdia, holding her goblet out for a refill of frozen plasma cubes and blood wine, “I feel Lavendanthians were

sent here to set up a new order. Humans make excellent servants, sex pets, and,” she licked her lips, “food.” At the latter, she chuckled softly, as if she was almost embarrassed by the admission, but Shalamar knew better. This woman was determined to control everything and everyone around her.

Drayden stiffened. He pressed his thigh tighter to Shalamar’s side.

The Orange Tabby clapped his hands. “Hear hear! It’s time we take back what is rightfully ours. If we couldn’t have it on Lavendanth, why not make Earth ours?”

“Indeed.” Nahdia raised her glass to him, the chandelier light gilding her long, red-painted nails.

Excited murmurs overwhelmed the table.

“Everyone,” said Nahdia, “we shall discuss this later. Right now, I have a special treat before the main course is announced.”

Silence prevailed. Several pairs of curious eyes turned toward their hostess.

Shalamar watched the scene unfold as she kept her concern camouflaged. A sense of foreboding washed over her.

“Stanwick!” Nahdia stood.

The butler appeared from a door in the back of the chamber. He strode across the dining hall, his footfalls ringing out, and approached what Shalamar had initially thought to be a small stage, but as he tugged the red velvet cover from it, she quickly realized it was a large Jacuzzi. He opened a door in its side, touched something, and a faint hum reached her.

Her jaw dropped. Nahdia intended to practice a legitimate blood bath.

## Chapter Five

Everyone at the table applauded. Regaining her composure, Shalamar clapped half-heartedly and affixed a fake smile on her face as worry danced in her heart and sent tendrils of ice out through her veins. A blood bath would make it clear what was between her and Drayden, and his true self would be revealed. Nahdia's views of shape-changers and humans would put them both in grave danger. Shalamar had accepted him as her mate, had hopes for a wonderful future with one of her own who could understand and relate to who and what she was, but now it seemed their love and their life together were in jeopardy.

Drayden nudged Shalamar's shoulder with his hand as if it was an accidental touch, but she knew better. He was scared, and so was she. They had to mask their fear, subdue it so the others didn't sense or smell it.

"Since this is a special occasion," Nahdia began and strutted toward the Jacuzzi, her stilettos tapping across the polished floor. "I thought we'd all get to know one another better. After all, if I am to lead the Reclamation, then I want to be better acquainted with my followers."

This couldn't be happening! Shalamar gulped and battled with a butterfly of apprehension that zipped about in her gut, but that butterfly was quickly growing into a vulture of terror. Nahdia truly intended to overcome the humans and establish Earth as the new Pantherian domain, but if she discovered Shalamar's identity, the situation could turn into total disaster.



“For those of you who might be wondering,” the woman continued, “I have established contacts all over the world. So far, I’ve discovered roughly one hundred thousand shifters who fled Lavendanth to Earth, and most of those who have mates have born pure shifters into this society. More shifters are being discovered around the world every week, so our numbers are mounting.” She spun, arms outstretched toward the tapestries rich with their Pantherian history, her laughter echoing in the chamber. “We are well on our way to reestablishing our society and way of life here. We shall rule Earth!”

The aroma of fear wafted over Shalamar. She recognized the scent. *Ebonee*.

The others detected it, too.

“Why are you frightened?” the Orange Tabby asked *Ebonee*. “You should be proud!”

All eyes turned toward Shalamar’s friend.

“Do we have a non-supporter in our midst?” Nahdia asked as she stalked back to the table, her footfalls ringing out with irritation. With a hard glint in her eyes, she pointed a finger at her. “Do you want to be a slave to the humans?”

“Of course not,” *Ebonee* replied with conviction. However, Shalamar knew her well enough to know when she was adding window dressing to her voice and when she was being sincere. “I’m not afraid in that manner,” her friend added. “I fear that too many of our kind will be lost. We’ve struggled so hard to meld with the human race and have established decent lives here.”

Shalamar sighed quietly and smiled. *Ebonee* had succeeded in diffusing the situation.

“Ah.” The feral light in Nahdia’s eyes faded. “Yes, I do see your point, but sacrifices must be made for every good cause, don’t you think?”

Ebonee nodded, the glassiness of her eyes from more than the fermented blood she'd been drinking. She briefly met Shalamar's gaze, a faux smile stretching her lush, ruby-red lips.

Satisfied, their hostess returned to the whirlpool. She watched for a moment as Stanwick withdrew black towels from a cabinet in the bath's hull and placed them within easy reach along the rim.

"Who will support me?" Nahdia gestured toward the Jacuzzi. "Who will consummate the cause to take this world as our own? Come, join and follow me to establish a new society where shape-changers rule and humans are returned to their place as our servants, pets, and food."

"Why us?" the Golden Tigress asked.

Nahdia's laughter greeted the Tigress. "Your wealth and power, of course, as the wealthy of Pittsburgh. Those of low or moderate income have no choice but to follow the wealthy and powerful. The nine of you will rule this region. Think of it as a smaller country within a country."

"It would be good to have back what is rightfully ours," said the Orange Tabby.

"But this world isn't ours to rule," Shalamar said, instantly regretting it.

Nahdia's body grew rigid. Slowly, she spun on her delicate stilettos. Anger flashed in her eyes. "Are you reprimanding me, Shalamar?"

"Not at all." Amazed at the strength in her voice, she forged onward. "All I'm saying is that if shifters take this world away from the humans, then we're no better than the Noirs who killed most and forced the rest of us to flee Lavendanth."

"We need our own domain," Nahdia insisted. "Don't you see," she swept one hand toward the tapestries, "that if we don't establish a strong society here, we'll eventually fade and die like the various species the humans have already made extinct."

Shalamar didn't tell her that survival of the fittest was the way of nature. Even amongst their kind, a Tabby didn't fight a Tiger. In the human world it would be like pitting a Chihuahua against a Doberman Pinscher. And in the human realm, they weren't only surviving amongst themselves and the humans, but there were other beings such as the vampires they had to co-exist with. Shalamar fought off a shiver. Such species were a bitch to cohabitate with, too.

"I *will* rule this world," Nahdia continued. She kicked off her heels, and Stanwick unzipped her dress, drawing it down her supine back to the crack of her ass. "With my wealth and my power, I will thwart the human race." She let the dress fall over her flared hips to land in layers around her feet. She stepped out of the circle of glistening silk. "In each world leader's place, I will put a shifter in power. We will grow in numbers and rule once again, but I will be mistress over all." She motioned for everyone to join her. "Come join me and let us consummate our agreement in a blood bath."

The Teal siblings rose and hurried over to the Jacuzzi. The older of the two slipped out of her expensive pantsuit as her sister shrugged out of her cashmere top. Garments littered the floor. The Tigress dropped her leather outfit on the tile, and the Tabby unfastened his tailored pants. Ebonee stood, casting Shalamar a distraught look, and followed the rest with Donna close on her heels.

"What are you going to do?" Drayden whispered.

"I haven't a clue," Shalamar whispered back. "But for the moment I'm going to go through the motions. If I don't, Nahdia will know something's wrong and do something drastic. I can't let her know who I am."

"Charlotte, dear," Nahdia called. "I know you're carrying offspring, so you don't have to share your body with us, but please come and soak your feet. I want you to be a part of this, too."

The pregnant Red smiled and left the table to join the others.

Shalamar stood and led Drayden along behind her. He walked with head bowed so that he appeared the perfect sex pet.

Nahdia glanced up. “Shalamar, leave your pet at the table with the Teals’ pets. He is but a pet, correct?”

Stricken, Shalamar fought not to show her distress. She dropped his leash and indicated that Drayden wait at the table for her. The feeling of doom grew heavier in the chamber. With effort, she forced herself to unzip her boots and pull them off. Her skirt, blouse and bra joined her boots in a pile, and she stepped up on the little platform where Stanwick stood to offer his hand and help her into the blood bath.

The older man’s gaze met Shalamar’s. Something passed between them. Inhaling, she leaned close, making a show of getting into the Jacuzzi so that she could sniff him. Her nostrils flared. *Stanwick was a Lavender! But how?* She’d always thought she was the only surviving Pantherian of her bloodline!

He briefly met her gaze, the expression in his eyes begging for her silence.

With her heart beating wildly, she tried to keep her face stoic as she slid into the hot blood.

“Mmm,” the Orange Tabby said to her, “I think I’ll fuck you first.”

Disgust roiled through Shalamar’s innards.

“Patience, Damon,” Nahdia said with a chuckle. “First we shall have a special toast.”

Servants appeared at the whirlpool with silver trays bearing tall flutes of white liquor.

“Please hold your glasses up as Stanwick comes around. He will drop a blood gem into each one,” said Nahdia. “We don’t have a sacrifice for this ceremony, so we’re using a cow’s heart. However, at the grand gathering in two months, we will indulge in a true heart wine.”

Excitement swept through those gathered in the tub, but Shalamar’s pulse jumped with adrenaline.

She held her glass up out of the Jacuzzi. Stanwick walked from one shifter to another with a glass bowl holding a chopped cow's heart. Using tongs, he dropped a chunk of fresh heart into the fermented liquid. Each glass of wine turned a deep bronze color, the pieces of life muscle sinking to the bottoms of all the flutes.

Shalamar had only participated in such a ceremony three times before. On such occasions, the human sacrificed had been an elder like Stanwick, one who had lived a full life. The ceremony was symbolic of the humans and shape-changers becoming one race.

As she stared at the lump of heart in her wine glass, it struck her that it looked similar to a Lavendanth night sky. What she wouldn't give to return to Lavendanth right now, but all the portals had been destroyed. She would never again see another vermilion sky or watch the galaxies in the distance.

"To the Reclamation," said Nahdia. "May we be strong, and may I become the mistress who makes history on both Lavendanth and Earth."

"Hear hear!" the others said.

Shalamar lifted her glass and drank. For the first time, the special drink tasted like filth to her.

Ebonee glided through the blood to Shalamar's side and kissed her full on the mouth. She trailed kisses along Shalamar's cheek to her ear and whispered, "They mustn't find out who you are. Make like you're ill, excuse yourself, and then sneak out. I'll meet you back at the apartment when I think it's safe." She leaned back, briefly met Shalamar's gaze, and smiled at the Red. She clasped her calf and licked the blood from it, making Red laugh.

The Tabby cupped Shalamar's breast and nuzzled her neck. "I shall take you first," he said.

"No."

"No?" He looked at her, his eyes hardening, tone indignant. "Do you refuse me in a blood-bath ceremony?"

“Is there a problem?” Nahdia asked. She pushed the Teals’ mouths away from her breasts and stayed the women’s questing hands. Something sinister flitted through her golden eyes. “Shalamar?”

Shalamar gulped as if she were sick and grimaced. “I—I don’t feel well. I think I m—may have eaten something that has disagreed with me.”

“Really?” Skepticism laced Nahdia’s voice.

“It has been a very long time since I’ve indulged in such rich foods.” Gulping again, Shalamar placed one hand at the base of her throat for effect. “Do you mind if I bow out, Mistress?”

At the use of the title, a happy glow appeared in Nahdia’s eyes, and she smiled from ear to ear.

“I wouldn’t want to foul your beautiful blood bath.” Shalamar wrinkled her nose and shut her eyes for effect. She opened them again and fixed their hostess with a pleading look. “I would feel terrible, and the ceremony would be ruined.”

“Of course.” Nahdia waved her hand toward her. “Stanwick will show you where you can clean up, but leave your sex pet here in case Damon isn’t enough to sate the rest of us females.”

“What?” The Tabby splashed across the whirlpool. “What makes you think my cock can’t satisfy all of you?”

Melodious laughter burst from Nahdia and grated on Shalamar’s nerves. “Oh, calm down. I was only teasing. We all know you are well-endowed and always ready for numerous couplings.”

The Teal sisters and Donna giggled. However, Ebonee’s laughter sounded forced.

Shalamar quickly climbed from the Jacuzzi. Stanwick wrapped a black towel around her. “Follow me, Ms. Shalamar.”

As she passed Drayden, she said softly, “I’ll try to figure out something.”

Drayden kept his head bowed, permitted only to stare at his feet as was customary for a sex pet. She only prayed she could get him out of

the mansion in time. Somehow, Shalamar knew something dreadful was about to unfold. Her hopes dissolved into cold ash as Stanwick led her to a door at the far end of the dining hall.

“Isn’t there another bathroom elsewhere?” she asked.

The older man shook his white head. He kept his voice low as he replied, “I’m sorry, Heir, but if I take you to another room, the mistress will suspect something.”

“You know who I am?” Shalamar’s heart stuttered painfully as a piercing sensation of hopelessness assailed her.

“Yes, Heir,” he whispered.

“But you’re a Lavender,” she said. “How can you serve Nahdia?”

“For the same reason you fear for your *pet*.”

Nausea claimed Shalamar’s stomach. She tried not to sway.

“Take my advice,” Stanwick continued. “Put on a show with your new mate. Make the mistress doubt her suspicions.”

“I fear it’s too late to convince her otherwise.”

“From what I’ve seen, you’ve done a good job so far.”

She offered him a sad smile. “I hope you’re right.”

## Chapter Six

It took Shalamar several minutes to compose herself. In the bathroom, she found a small shower designed to go with the Jacuzzi. How many blood baths had Nahdia held here already? Didn't she know it was sacrilege to do so just to stroke one's ego? Shalamar stared at her reflection in the mirror and groaned. What was she thinking? It was obvious Nahdia didn't give a shit about anything other than her rise to world leader over shifters, humans, and other co-existing people and creatures. What an inane position for such a black soul as she.

Shalamar couldn't take Drayden and run. Nahdia or someone under her control would surely catch them. If they returned to Shalamar's apartment building, they would be followed and forced to flee again. What if they ran into the hall and Shalamar activated the portal and escaped that way? She couldn't leave without Ebonee, and that was even if she could get both Drayden and Ebonee away from the others. Worse, what if they tried to escape through the portal only to discover it was no more than an ugly decoration? No, her only option was to play this out and hope for the best, whatever that may be.

After showering, she wrapped another towel around her body and stepped out into the dining hall to find Stanwick waiting for her.

"I'm here on Nahdia's orders," he said. "She wants to make sure that you return to the dinner with the others."

Nahdia certainly covered all her bases.

Reaching the table, Shalamar placed her hand on her chair, but Nahdia called out, "Shalamar, why don't you and your sex pet



entertain us? We've sated our sexual appetites, but watching you with your pet may spur another round of coupling during our blood bath."

It would be difficult to hide the fear mounting within Shalamar. If the others detected it, she and Drayden would be punished severely. She battled her anxiety, stuffed it down somewhere deep, and refused to let her heart slam painfully. She focused on the adrenaline pounding through her body and managed to somewhat calm herself.

"It seems that you have no choice," Stanwick said at her side, his voice low. "Where would you like to couple?"

She glanced at Drayden, who stood with eyes downcast, body rigid. He had to keep his fear in check, too. Shalamar prayed he'd be strong and succeed in disguising it.

"If they want a show, then let's give them a show," Shalamar replied softly. "Clear this end of the table, please, Stanwick."

"As you wish."

Stanwick clapped his hands, and servants appeared. They cleaned the end of the table where Nahdia and Ebonee had been sitting. Only the pristine white tablecloth remained.

"Pet!" Shalamar called. "Come to me and satisfy my desires. You shall fuck me until I am sated, is that understood?"

"Yes." Drayden padded toward her, head still bent, leash dangling behind him.

"Take me on the table," she demanded. "Do so now."

She dropped her towel, the cool air slipping across her skin, and unhooked Drayden's leash. He took her in his arms, his mouth claiming hers. He released her lips and nibbled along Shalamar's neck. "What are we doing?" he asked, his mouth against her skin.

"Putting on a good show and hopefully saving our lives by doing so," she whispered back.

Drayden picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. He placed her on the table. Lying down, Shalamar spread her legs for him as he trailed kisses down her torso, his tongue swirling over each breast, along her midriff, down to the junction of her thighs.

“More!” Nahdia yelled.

“Fuck her with your tongue,” the Orange Tabby called loudly. “I want to be very hard before I couple with the next female!”

Sounds of splashing reached Shalamar where she sprawled on the tabletop. Although she worried about the situation she and Drayden were in, desire still flared within her. Group or public sex was accepted practice in shifter culture, but most preferred the privacy of sex with their life mate. However, Shalamar had always liked the idea of others watching her while she fucked. Still, she kept an ear tuned toward the Jacuzzi.

“What do we do once we’ve mated for them?” Drayden said against her pussy, the slight vibration of his voice shooting little tendrils of sensation to her core.

“We’ll just have to figure it out,” she sighed, trying to concentrate on both his ministrations and the sounds from the whirlpool, “when we get to that point.” Her fingers threaded into his mane of thick blond hair, but her hips seemed to have a mind of their own. She couldn’t get enough of his lapping tongue. He licked the folds of her cunt, his breath hot against her sensitive skin, tongue rough, tantalizing. “Oh, yes!” she murmured.

Nonchalantly, she threw a glance toward the whirlpool through slitted eyes and cried out for effect. The women were attentive to the Orange Tabby. Even the pregnant one allowed her mate to tongue her from time to time, but Nahdia kept her attention on her and Drayden.

“Stanwick!” Nahdia’s voice startled Shalamar. “Have the servants bring in some pig’s blood!”

*Pig’s blood?* That was nasty shit, especially if it involved blood of a pig’s liver or any kind of liver for that matter. What was Nahdia up to? Shalamar wasn’t so sure she wanted to know.

Drayden slipped two fingers into her pussy. The feeling they created had her wishing she could change, but if she shifted so would Drayden. Nahdia couldn’t find out he was a true Transfer. She’d have him murdered for certain. Humans could be taught how to become

shifter-like, but they could never truly change their form. Worry rose in Shalmar's mind, but she forced it at bay. Transference was a lifestyle, not an ability. A real Transfer, the blending of human and shape-shifter genes, would scare the shit out of Nahdia, and she'd feel threatened, vulnerable. No, Shalamar couldn't change forms, but oh how she wanted to! Sex as a shifter was so much more fulfilling than in human form.

His fingers stroked her inner walls. Her thighs began to quiver, and the coil within her tightened. He inserted another finger and worked them back and forth, hand-fucking her.

"Take her!" someone shouted. "Bend her over the table and fuck her!"

"Come on, put your cock in her and make her squeal," someone else yelled.

More splashing followed, and the giggles of the Teal sisters drifted through the dining chamber. Music trickled into the meal room. Shalamar's eyes flew open. Homeland music! The peals, tinkles, and stringed notes gyrated around her. Oh, how Nahdia played dirty. The wail of a cat pierced the hall. Lavendanth music wasn't vocal like human songs. It was full of feral calls that melded with the homeland instruments. Part of true shifter coupling always involved the magic of their music. Shalamar craned her head. There, to the left of the table, a band had quietly filed into the dining hall and set up their instruments.

Nahdia knew that if Shalamar followed the music, she'd have no choice but to change. Did the woman suspect what or who Drayden was?

At that moment, he grabbed Shalamar's hips, his palms under her ass, and buried his face in her crotch. His tongue delved and licked as his mouth suckled and kissed. Quivering, she bit her lip and whimpered. She tugged on his hair, wanting more, needing more, and afraid to give in to it.

“Enough foreplay,” Nahdia said. “We shall join you at the table. Fuck her!”

Oh, shit. This was not good. Shalamar didn’t know what to do. If Nahdia got too close to them, she’d definitely pick up on their fears.

Drayden straightened, pulled her off the table, and pushed her facedown against it.

Footsteps approached them, and the others joined in on their sexual foreplay. Nahdia climbed onto the table and lay on her side a foot from Shalamar’s face. Blood dripped off of her, and a crimson stain crawled through the expensive fibers of the tablecloth. The Red clambered onto the table, too, and snuggled her gently rounding belly against Nahdia’s backside. She reached one hand around the mistress and fondled her breasts.

With her ass in the air, Shalamar stretched out her arms, placed one hand in Nahdia’s crotch, and cupped her head with her other. As their hostess, it was customary to show gratitude by looking into her eyes during an orgy coupling. Fingers prodded Shalamar’s rear, and Drayden’s mouth captured her cunt again. She gasped, maintaining eye contact with Nahdia. The woman smirked, her eyelids lowering with her pleasure.

Just behind Nahdia to the right, one Teal sat down in a chair, legs splayed, and her sister went down on her. The Orange Tabby helped Ebonee to the cold, hard floor and reclined on top of her, his ass quickly pumping up and down as she wrapped her long legs around his, her hips arching in time to his thrusts.

The shifter singing with the band knew just the song to evoke a mood. She wailed and warbled about coupling in the jungles under the stars, multiple partners, and all of shifterdom both happy and sated.

Drayden trailed his tongue over Shalamar’s right ass cheek. His fingers slid into her crack, and his thumb probed the tight, circular muscle hidden there. He pushed gently. She sucked in a breath, preparing for the penetration of it as she kept looking into Nahdia’s

suspicious, gold eyes. If she didn't shift, Nahdia would know something was wrong, and if Shalamar did change, Drayden would have no choice but to transform, too.

She almost uttered a string of choice profanities about their situation, but her mate's gentle, erotic touches and the sights and sounds around her forced her attention back to the pleasure coursing through her body like tidal waters.

Finally, Drayden slid his thumb into her ass. Her body adjusted to the intrusion, and tingles began spreading through her hips, into her loins and up along her lower belly. He slowly slipped the digit in and out several times, each movement propelling more spirals of pleasure into Shalamar's innards so that they settled in her pussy.

"Take her," Nahdia purred.

"As you wish, Mistress," Drayden answered.

His prick kissed her opening. Shalamar gasped and arched her hips backward, needing him to fill her up.

Nahdia smiled, leaned forward, and kissed Shalamar's lips. "He's a fine pet, isn't he, love?"

"Yes," she said. "That's why I picked him." A lightning bolt of sensation sliced through her center as Drayden pushed the head of his cock into her pussy. "I would like to keep him," Shalamar gulped and shut her eyes just for a moment, "if you are willing to sell him."

"No, I have something else in mind for this pet, something everyone will enjoy," Nahdia said and kissed her again.

Ebonee's orgasmic cries permeated the chamber and wrapped around the dining table. Within moments, the Orange Tabby moved from Ebonee to Donna, pounding into his new lover's pussy with zeal, her ass high in the air. The other sex pets lay down amongst the entwined bodies and filled pussies with their eager cocks, their bare asses pumping. The moans of the Teal sisters grew louder, more urgent. Red rolled Nahdia back and playfully bit her throat, fangs half revealed. Nahdia laughed and swatted Red's hip.

Pushing his cock fully into her, Drayden clasped Shalamar's left hip, the fingers of his right hand splayed over her ass, his thumb still doing its short, rhythmic strokes in her ass. She couldn't help herself and reared her head back, hissing in ecstasy. Nahdia seized the opportunity to clasp her head, a hand on each side of her face, and locked gazes with her.

A pleased moan drifted out of Shalamar.

Nahdia smiled.

"Ungh!" Drayden pumped into her, and Shalamar pushed her hips back, meeting him thrust for thrust. The feeling of his thighs brushing hers, his pelvis slapping her ass, one hand gripping her, and his thumb in her asshole forced her over the edge of reason. She couldn't control it, couldn't keep it under lock and key anymore, and she wasn't so sure she wanted to.

Shalamar shifted.

"Shalamar!" Drayden said, fear in his voice.

Nahdia's fingers tightened around her face. "Come," she ordered. "Let go and ride out the orgasm. Come for him, Shalamar."

She knew Nahdia had seen her true identity in her eyes, but what could she do? Fur prickled her skin and erupted from her pores. The sting of her fangs lengthening filled her mouth, and her nails grew into sharp, deadly claws where she gripped the tablecloth.

The Teal, whose sister licked her into an orgasm, screamed out her release.

Drayden's cock, hard and large, filled Shalamar up. He pummeled her ass, and her inner walls tightened, tightened...

"Come!" Nahdia ordered, her gaze boring into Shalamar's.

Drayden wiggled his thumb, and pleasure rocketed through Shalamar's core. Her pussy throbbed, once, twice, three times, and the orgasm crashed over her. She snarled and hissed, bucking her ass against Drayden's prick. He grunted, removed his thumb, and clasped her other hip. His rhythm escalated, and a moment later, she felt his

cock throbbing inside her. Warmth bathed her womb. She snarled, pulling out of Nahdia's hold, and screeched her release to the rafters.

"Stanwick! Now!" Nahdia screamed.

Pig's blood flowed over Shalamar's body. She hissed, breaking free from Drayden. Turning on her heel, she faced her mate. He hadn't shifted. *How was that possible?* Mating with her, the music, the sights and sounds... He should have changed into his Transfer form.

The coppery odor of pig's blood was repulsive to Lavendanthians. It was the only meat they didn't consume. And worse, this blood had been soaked with—Shalamar gulped, bile rising in her throat—pig's liver. Only those who were to be shamed and ridiculed were bathed in such disgusting liquid.

"Lavender Heir!" Nahdia shrieked and leapt off the table to crouch on all fours. "You're of the Royal Family. How dare you come into my abode, my center of power! I suspected, but I thought I was overly suspicious until my music teachers confirmed my suspicions. Until now, I truly thought your breed was dead." To show her distaste, she spat on the floor.

Shalamar peeled her lips back, baring her fangs. She whirled on Nahdia, growling. "You are filthy. You want to take up where the Noirs left off. You're not happy unless you have control and cause misery for others. That is not the way of Lavendanthians. You're no better than the Noirs were."

"It doesn't matter that I'm not a true Noir," she said. An evil smile stretched Nahdia's mouth.

Behind her, the others took threatening poses in case Shalamar should move toward their mistress. Ebonee tried to maintain a similar pose, but Shalamar knew it was only for show.

"And I shall rule as a Noir," Nahdia added.

"You're nothing more than a Platinum, a weakling, a servant for the Lavenders," Shalamar sneered. "But that time was long ago, and I have no interest in such customs."

The others, save for Ebonee, surrounded her.

“You’re not worthy to be an Heir,” Donna sniped.

Drayden placed his back against Shalamar’s.

“What is this?” Nahdia queried, her cruel laughter falling over the room like an offensive odor. “A pet protecting its master? How sweet.” She tittered again and clapped her hands. “Hear me,” she said loudly. “Kill her pet. He’s our main course for tonight’s supper.”

The guests and musicians sent up a howl of approval and moved closer. Ebonee shrank away and stood to one side of the dining table.

“He will taste delicious.” Nahdia licked her lips.

Something ugly reared up inside Shalamar, something that frightened her to her soul, but she had no way of reining it in before it consumed her. She spun, her arm whipping out, talons bared, and sliced the Tigress’ abdomen. The Tigress stumbled away, hissing and mewling. Seizing the opportunity and an opening in the ring of attackers, Shalamar lunged at Nahdia and slashed her breasts. Her claws tugged at her flesh, shredded it into pink and white ribbons, the gashes wide. Blood oozed out of the wounds and trickled down her belly, speckling her legs and pattering on the floor.

“You bitch!” Morphing, she lunged at Shalamar, her golden eyes flashing, teeth bared, and claws ready to rip her into hundreds of pieces.

This time, the ugliness within Shalamar surged all the way to the surface. She captured Nahdia’s hands, breaking both wrists. The woman screamed, her face twisting in agony. Someone yelled the order to kill Shalamar, but a frightened murmur swept through the others.

It didn’t matter what they did. She knew whatever had consumed her was part of being a Lavender, the reason why her breed was so feared. Nahdia backed away from Shalamar, her arms cradled against her bleeding breasts, wrists bent at odd, sickening angles. Shalamar forged toward her and shoved her ass against the table. Nahdia fell backward, and her head cracked the surface hard enough Shalamar



imagined the woman saw stars. In an instant, Shalamar lunged up onto the tabletop, snarling, and sank her teeth into Nahdia's esophagus. The woman struggled, her cries pitiful, strangled, the sound vibrating against Shalamar's eager tongue. Nahdia beat at her shoulders, kicking and flailing her legs.

With a feral growl, Shalamar ripped her throat out.

Blood sprayed in a pretty fan pattern. Warmth coated Shalamar's tongue, neck, and furred breasts, the coppery taste in her mouth heady, intoxicating. A fine mist settled over her lavender fur and painted the remaining white of the tablecloth bright vermillion.

## Chapter Seven

For several minutes, Shalamar crouched there over Nahdia's body. She wiped the blood, muscle, and skin from her mouth, tugged it from her fangs, and then turned toward the others.

The servants held pistols sited on her. All the shifter band members aimed weapons, too. Everyone had changed into their true forms and stood with teeth bared, claws out.

*Now what? Die for nothing?*

Custom was ingrained in their kind. They couldn't kill her, couldn't risk bad luck, and misery heaped upon them a thousand fold for murdering a Lavender without just cause, especially the true heir.

"You must be banished," said the Orange Tabby. "We can't kill you, but we can't have you here amongst us either."

"I go where she goes," Ebonee said and stepped forward to stand at Shalamar's side.

"But we *can* kill you, Ebonee," said one of the Teals. The green-blue of her fur glistened in the chandeliers' light as she crept closer, her stance that of a panther about to pounce.

"Enough," Shalamar snapped. "She goes with us."

"Go?" Red echoed. "Go where?"

"Through the portal," Shalamar replied, praying her suspicion wasn't wrong. "I know Nahdia somehow pieced together the one in the main hall. She had to have gathered shards of it from every shifter she could find who had kept a piece."

The others cast uneasy glances at one another.

"That's what that gaudy frame is out there." She pointed toward the banquet room doors. "Nahdia created a replacement portal."

The Orange Tabby motioned for the women to join him next to the band, who watched Shalamar with glittering eyes, weapons still poised to fire. Finally, the shifters nodded, and the Tigress stepped forward. “Go on, then. See if her portal functions. Leave this world. Return to it and let the Noirs there kill you. May your blood be on their hands instead of ours.”

“I go with them,” said Drayden.

“You shall stay and serve us.” The Tigress purred and shot him a lustful look. “I’d like your cock in me first.”

Shalamar raised her hackles, but Drayden stayed her with a hand on her shoulder. He changed before them. Patches of reddish fur covered his arms, hands, his thighs. Short, velvety fur sprouted on his face. His hair lengthened into a mane, and the width of his nose grew broader, more muzzle-like.

One Teal screamed in shock, and the other gasped out, “A true Transfer? How is this possible?”

“And my true mate,” Shalamar added with conviction, ready to fight to the death for him. “He goes with me.” She trembled so hard she feared she’d collapse. There was no way she was going without Drayden.

“Good riddance,” said the Orange Tabby. He took a .38 that a servant offered him and waved it at Shalamar. “Get moving. Go into the hall. Stanwick, keep your pistol trained on the Transfer’s head. It will keep her majesty from doing anything stupid if she doesn’t want her mate dead.”

With fear threading her veins, Shalamar led the way into the marble-tiled corridor and turned left toward the huge square-shaped ornament that encompassed both of the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. The Tabby followed closely with Stanwick next to him. The others corralled Ebonee and Drayden.

They stopped a few feet from the portal. The multi-colored glass stones framing it winked in the light of the foyer chandelier.

Shalamar stared up at the wide, shiny bands that composed the square. How had Nahdia figured out how to put together such a tool and did it really work? Other than the Lavender Family, only select shifters had the ability to activate a portal. Suddenly she knew one of the reasons Nahdia had kept Stanwick under her control. She'd known he was a Lavender, and since he was old, he was less likely to be a threat and could be kept for the sole purpose of activating the portal.

"Touch it!" the Teals ordered, their voices harmonizing.

"Leave this world," Donna said, her tone full of disdain.

Shalamar shot her a look of pure disgust. *Bitch*. Some friend she'd turned out to be.

The older of the Teals sidled up to Shalamar and slapped her face. "Do what you're told, you purple freak!"

Thank the gods for fur! Otherwise, it would have stung like a son of a bitch, and Shalamar might've killed her, too.

"Aren't you the pot calling the kettle black, you green-haired bitch-cat?" Shalamar snarled. "I should go ahead and rip your throat out like I did Nahdia's."

Although the Teal wore full fur, Shalamar imagined the color beneath her pretty coat was a stark white. The fear that appeared in the Teal's amber eyes enforced her suspicions. Feeling mean, she leaned forward and added, "And if you don't shut your fucking mouth, I'll do the same to your sister, too, no matter the consequences delivered to me later by your sidekicks." She inhaled the Teal's aroma of terror and grinned widely to show her full fangs. "Do we understand one another?"

She tried to meet Shalamar's eyes, but her gaze shifted to the floor, and she stepped aside.

It pissed Shalamar off that she was a Lavender and had no power here. She didn't want to exercise her rights as the Heir, but if just a couple of the others considered her their mistress, then she, Drayden, and Ebonee might have a fighting chance with the others at the party.

She turned and pressed her paw-hand to the glassy surface.

Upon Shalamar's touch, a ripple surged out along the glass and gemstones as if she had disturbed placid water and ran the perimeter of the shiny surface. Relief that she had been correct about the portal as well as fear of the unknown spiraled through her. What would she find on the other side after so many years? Would the Noirs kill them?

The gateway brightened, transforming into liquid silver, but just as quickly as its surface moved and grew vivid, the color shifted and turned black as midnight, followed by a blazing, translucent vermillion. Stars burst and popped in the portal, comets flared within it, and the red hue shifted into other brilliant colors, the sparks and fire almost searing the eyes with its intense light.

Someone shoved Shalamar. Still in only her fur, she pitched forward and threw her hands out in front of her. Shalamar's only thought was of Drayden. Tumbling through space as stars whizzed past her, she squeezed her eyes shut to the crimson explosions surrounding her. Nausea assaulted her stomach. She gulped, hoping she didn't spew her supper all over herself.

Finally, she bumped against something hard and cold. Opening her eyes, Shalamar saw Lavendanth on the other side of a dimensional portico. *Another framed portal? Was that possible?*

Nahdia had built a new one from pieces, so why not? Shalamar mused. Somehow the Noir wannabe had figured out a way to make gateway fragments functional and had gathered pieces on Earth. Could Nahdia also have had a smaller, intact portal in her possession? One that had allowed her to return Lavendanth in search of additional pieces?

Shalamar's mind reeled at the implications.

She placed her paw-hand on the cold, translucent surface, and the gateway turned to liquid. In a crouch, she crawled through it into a green glen. Her gaze landed on the broken portico. Someone must have been running through the jungle with it as he or she escaped. Although not a framed portal, the piece she had stepped through was

part of the shattered remains still littering the ground. It was large enough to be salvaged and used as a small portal.

She glanced around at the vibrant foliage, the vines and heavy fronds growing thickly around the small clearing. The calls of Lavendanth's jungles awakened feelings in her she hadn't felt for years, but her worry for Drayden, Ebonee, and Stanwick proved stronger.

A pecking noise drew her attention. At her feet, Drayden looked back at her through the translucent stone.

"Drayden!" Relieved, she dropped to her knees, touched the portal remnant, and helped him come through it. "I thought I'd never see you again!"

He kissed her, their muzzles awkward. Blood covered his chest.

She gasped. "Are you wounded?"

He shook his head. "I killed the Orange Tabby, but when the other shifters still in the dining hall heard the disturbance, Ebonee and I jumped through after you. She should be here any second."

Rapping on the glass drew Shalamar's attention, and she touched the flat gemstone, allowing Ebonee to crawl through it and into her arms. Hugging her, she said, "I'm so happy to have you with us, but won't you miss Earth?"

"No," Ebonee said. "You're my friend, Shalamar, my mistress."

"I am no one's mistress. Those days are long gone."

"Hold the portal open," Ebonee said, smiling. "One more is coming through."

"Who?" Dread pooled in Shalamar's heart as she pressed her paw-hand on the big stone's surface and felt it become like water again.

"Stanwick," said a voice. "If my mistress will accept me."

She offered her aid and helped him from the portal. "You are most welcome, Stanwick. At least I am not the only Lavender back on Lavendanth."

"I imagine there are others," the older shifter said.

"You were an Elder?" she asked.

He nodded.

“But you served Nahdia.”

“Nahdia forced me to serve her or be killed.” He shook his head sadly. “She wanted me around for my talent of opening portals. And since I’m a Lavender, it amused her to make me her slave. I didn’t relish dying before I saw the legend become truth.”

Heat singed Shalamar’s cheeks.

He smiled at her, his white mustache drawing back into severe hooks. “The others felt that having me in their midst was bad luck, so I solved their dilemma for them and jumped through the portal with your Sable friend.” His laughter twirled on the wind sweeping across the glen.

“Well,” she said and patted his narrow shoulder, “I’m glad to have another of my family here.”

“If you and I survived,” he said sagely, “then I’m sure there must be others of the Lavender Family too.”

“I pray you’re right.” With a frown, Shalamar scanned the foliage and vines choking the landscape. “I see no sign of shifter life, but perhaps we have arrived in pure wilderness.”

“Wilderness suits me just fine,” Drayden said, pulling her into his arms.

“Me too.” Ebonee flopped down onto a blanket of moss and sighed contentedly.

“Why didn’t you shift into your Transfer state?” Shalamar asked Drayden. “Were you unable to?”

“I can control it, Shalamar,” he replied. “The more I learn about what I am, the more abilities I have that I’m able to manipulate. I didn’t want to shift in front of everyone and make matters worse for us.”

“Good thing you didn’t,” Stanwick stated. “Nahdia would have ordered you shot the moment you changed.”

Shalamar thought of Drayden’s mother. Convinced he’d made a wise decision, she caressed his cheek.

He hugged her tighter.

Emotions she had never experienced before gyrated with a healthy dose of dismay, uncertainty, hope, fear and liberation. The relief that she hadn't lost her mate or her best friend nearly put her to her knees.

She scanned their surroundings again. *But where did they go from here?* Although Lavendanth was naturally wild, the destruction of their world, their government and their cities added to the untamed atmosphere. Did they dare rebuild everything? Could they? And what of the Noirs?

Shalamar shivered.

"Do you mourn leaving Earth?" Drayden whispered.

"Not at all. It feels wonderful to be home." Her gaze wandered the rich greens and deep browns of the jungle dotted with vivid splashes of color as blooms released their intoxicating odors into the atmosphere. Night birds issued melodious sounds, and Shalamar remembered how she used to lay on the balcony of her father's grand home and listen to them until she grew sleepy. Could they begin such a life again? Did she want to?

"Shalamar?" Drayden said.

She returned her attention to him and met his gaze. "It's just that I never expected to come home again. Now that we're here, what do we do? How do we move on without the danger of the Noirs?"

"The Noirs worry me, too, but regardless, we're together," Ebonee added. "And remember what I said earlier about wishing I could wear my fur coat? Now I can wear it any time I like!"

Laughter bubbled out of Shalamar. "Only you, Ebonee."

Ebonee grinned, her blue eyes brilliant and full of happiness.

Stanwick stretched and rubbed the back of his neck. "No matter what happens or who we find, I will never be someone's slave again. I'll die first."

"You must realize it's a distinct possibility, Stanwick." Shalamar watched the elder with sympathy. "We have no idea what has happened here since we left."



Stanwick nodded. "I know that, but I meant what I said. I refuse to be a slave."

Turning in Drayden's arms, Shalamar snuggled her head into the crook of his neck. "I'm worried. Any non-Noir is in danger, but Lavenders are killed on sight. Where do we go from here?" she asked. "What do we do?"

"We're life mates," Drayden replied, his voice rumbling in her ear as he caressed her back. "Whatever happens, we have each other, and we have good friends to share life with us or fight with us, if the need should arise."

"I vote that we hide in the jungle and scout out the nearest towns," Ebony suggested. She lay back and stared up at the deepening evening sky. "We'll watch for a while, see what's going on, who's ruling whom, and then go from there."

"Sounds like a good start to me," Drayden agreed.

"Me too," said Stanwick.

Smiling, Shalamar kissed Drayden's neck. "I guess we have a plan. If we need to, we can survive in the jungle indefinitely. And you're right, Drayden, what matters is that we have one another. I'm just happy that you turned out to be of the panther persuasion."

He leaned back and looked deeply into her eyes. "I think it's time we fulfill our destiny. Ready to embark on our future together?"

Shalamar nodded and marveled at the love she felt for her life mate. "As long as I have you by my side, I'm ready for anything."

## THE END

<http://kbhotromances.wordpress.com>

Write to her at: [kiyarabenoiti@hotmail.com](mailto:kiyarabenoiti@hotmail.com)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kiyara Benoiti is a professional freelance writer. She resides in the mountains with her family, two dogs, and several cats that she saved from an animal shelter. Kiyara loves to write erotic romance so hot it melts the hinges off the bedroom door.

When you pick up one of her books you'll find vampires to demons to lonely schoolteachers and dark, brooding men. Just be prepared for surprises and scorching love scenes. For more about Kiyara and her fiction or to pick up one of her free e-books, visit <http://kbhotromances.wordpress.com> or sign up for her newsletter at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/benoiti-stewart\\_hotromances/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/benoiti-stewart_hotromances/)

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