

## Prelude

*When you are bound by a fealty, an oath is pledged that cannot be severed lest you bear a fatal consequence.*

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**T**HIRTY YEARS AGO SEEMS LIKE a lifetime. In reality, it is merely a blink in time.

I was barely a woman of thirteen years when my mother, Jenna, sat with me on my bed, the room surrounding us adorned with innocence, joy, and love.

This was not the first time she told me the story of her youth. Each time the words flowed from her lips, I was enchanted. The scent of her still clung to my mind—sweet lemon peel on a bed of fragrant orange blossoms. Her dark mahogany hair spilled sweetly around my arm as she held me close and spoke of her beloved Tishar, a high knight of the Carador realm, a place inhabited by Faeries and other magical beings.

“He was magnificent,” she said, her green eyes sparkling like emerald gems in the sunlight. “Fae males

## Fealty

are so different than those you find here,” she sadly added.

“You loved him?” I asked, my voice soft and innocent—a child not yet stained by the cruelty of men.

“Yes,” she answered. “I loved him very much. But,” she sighed, “he had a mission to fulfill. Our kind, the Fae, were dwindling. Fewer and fewer children were being conceived. Something had to be done.”

“So he called upon the Spirians, children of the Angels,” I said, having heard this story before. No matter how many times she told it, I never grew tired of hearing the tale.

“Yes,” she said, tugging me closer. “He did. Five of the strongest Spirian leaders were gifted with Tishar’s most precious treasures. Four of my slave sisters and I were sent to be with the Spirian males in hopes of strengthening our race.”

“Then the bad Spirians came,” I said.

My mother’s beautiful eyes grew dull with the memory. “The Shadows,” she said with spite. “They killed the good Spirian males and their children. They took me and my slave sisters, but they didn’t know about the fealty Tishar had formed between himself and the five Spirian males.”

“Is the fealty magic?” I asked her, not really knowing what a fealty was at the time.

“Yes,” she said. “Tishar wanted to ensure our safety. Anyone who caused us physical harm would die a short but painful death.” The distance in her voice alarmed me.

I shrank back a little.

Sensing my discomfort, she pulled me against her, squeezing my shoulders for reassurance. “Unfortunately,” she continued, a hardness in her tone, “the Shadows have their ways of causing us pain without causing physical harm.”

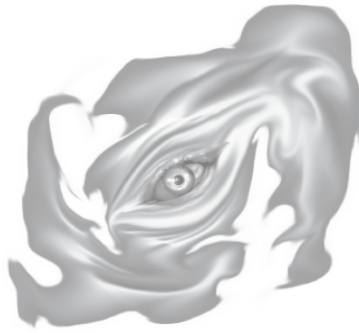
## Rowena Portch

She turned me to face her; determination and alarming seriousness hardened her expression. “Hide your gifts, Raeiza. Never use them or let others see them. Keep your thoughts and feelings deep in your soul.” She shook me to emphasize her plea.

“I promise, Mim,” I whimpered, tears stinging my eyes.

She held me close, embedding that promise like a stain that would never wash out.





## Chapter 1

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**F**EW THINGS COMPARE TO THE beauty of Edinburgh, Scotland in late May. I typically enjoyed my bike ride home, but tonight, I was late. It was 9:00 p.m., a scant hour before my shift at Malones Pub.

I rode my bike down Lygon Road, past the elaborately landscaped mansions. The Linden trees were blooming early this year; their sweet fragrance welcomed me home as I turned right onto our cobblestone drive.

In the absence of moonlight, our home resembled Dracula's castle with its dark stone walls and dimly lit windows covered in heavy drapes. Short wrought-iron fences guarded the landscape like dark, immovable soldiers. Everything was perfectly in order, just like the man who owned it—my father, Drake Tomei, Shadow leader of Europe and the bane of my existence.

I parked my bike against the stone wall and ran toward the front door. It opened before I could reach the handle. My father's looming figure filled the wide frame. He was a handsome man with peppered hair that he wore short

## F e a l t y

and combed back. As usual, not a strand of it was out of place.

“Good, God, Raeiza; I was worried sick,” he said in a thick London accent. His eyes widened as they scanned me from head to toe. I was littered with blood and straw. “What happened to you?”

My father was the only person who called me by that name. I preferred Rae, but he refused to acknowledge that simple request. I gently brushed past him, in a hurry to take my shower and prepare for work. “A mare gave birth. The foal was breech,” I called over my shoulder.

I winced as his strong hand gripped my arm and spun me around. “You will look at me as we speak,” he emphasized. He stood a good foot above me. His gray eyes peering into mine. “Look at yourself,” he said. “You look like a commoner.” He turned his head, obviously not appreciating the aroma I emitted. “I gave you a perfectly fine auto and yet you insist on riding that monstrosity on two wheels.”

“Father, please, I’m late for work.”

“I don’t like you working,” he reminded me. “There is no need for it.” He closed his eyes and shook his head as if summoning patience. “Honestly, Raeiza; you will be mated by the end of this year. Bennet will not permit this foolishness.”

My stomach sank at the thought of leaving Scotland to live with my appointed mate in New York City. Bennet Graves was an investment broker. His idea of paradise was the penthouse suite on the top of a high rise. Not much need for a horse vet out there, I imagined.

“I’m finishing my degree, Father.”

He shook me. “Why?”

I despised the way he made my spirit cower. It took

everything I had to keep respect in my voice when I answered. “Because, dear Father, you taught me to finish what I started.”

Unable to deny that fact, he released me. “Get cleaned up. You smell like a fish pond.”

I started up the staircase that curved like a swan’s wing up to the second floor. The highly-polished rosewood and brass trim always seemed impossibly bright in this house of anger and resentment.

“Raeiza,” he called.

I turned to face him. “Yes, Father.”

“Bennet is coming to see you next Thursday. He will be staying for dinner. I expect you to be here.”

My stomach felt as if I had swallowed molten lead. I nodded to him.

He raised his chin up a notch, studying me with those cold gray eyes. He expected an answer—a verbal answer.

“I will be here, Father.”

It took a moment for him to release me from his stare—a look that could pin and restrain me as fast and hard as iron shackles.

I turned and continued ascending the stairs.

When I reached my room, decorated in white and pale blue, the tears began to flow. I had stood up to my father once long ago; it ended badly for me and resulted in having my mother banned.

He was a cruel and powerful man—a business investor with a heart of cold steel. He handled his acquisitions with the same bitter affection he bestowed upon his family. His charm, money, and absolute power were his only assets, aside from his attractive physique that never failed to lure available females who never stayed long.

Born and raised in London’s high society, I was

## F e a l t y

taught that a proper Shadow female obeyed or suffered consequences. I was passed between my father's acquaintances like a rare, expensive toy. When my mother couldn't stand his abuse of me any longer, she was banned from our immediate clan and sent to a more common clan where she would spend the rest of her days. Two years later, she had died—or so we were told.

Deep down, I knew she was alive—I could feel her, or at least I thought I could. I was her only child, something that seemed to irritate my father, seeing it was the male in a union who determined when his female became pregnant. Picking up her picture from my dresser, I noticed that she looked like me, only older and with shorter hair. Her pale eyes seemed sad as they stared back at me. The picture blurred behind my tears. Things were so different now that she was gone.

I set the picture down, pulled my clothes off over my head and tossed them into the bin. My jeans came next. Everything would have to be soaked. Our servant, Olivia, was a gem at getting stains out and keeping everything impressively clean. She had been our caretaker for as long as I could remember.

Padding my way into the bathroom, I pulled the tie from my hair and shook it out. Long, thick waves of chestnut hair spilled over my shoulders and down my back. Bits of straw floated to the floor.

Like my mother, I had gray-green eyes that looked too pale to be paired with dark hair. I had been pretty once. Now, I purposely avoided makeup and attractive hair styles. I wanted to be anonymous. No matter how hard I tried, though, my efforts never seemed to detract the clan males' attention. They hovered around me like hungry sharks, waiting to be fed.



The shower faucet squeaked with objection as I turned the polished brass handles for a mix of hot and cold. Steam lifted and began filling the large space with inviting humidity. A hot shower was exactly what I needed now. Anything to take my mind off Bennet's upcoming visit.

I stepped into the open space and allowed the five shower heads to saturate my body with heat. Closing my eyes, I buried my head beneath the heavy spray and imagined it was a waterfall in the midst of a lush forest—far away from high society and arranged unions with men who only wanted another precious possession.

The last time I had met Bennet Graves, I was just barely a woman of twenty years. I'd changed since then and wondered whether Bennet would even want me any longer. He needed a gifted, high status female to bear his children. As far as anyone knew, I had no gifts like most Spirian females my age, and I did my best to hide my status behind a simple physique built more for athletic activities than filling out expensive gowns.

Scrubbing my hair with jasmine-scented shampoo, I tried to imagine the ugliest thing to wear during our dinner together. Surely once he saw how homely I could be, he would change his mind about our union.

My father's inevitable riposte to my blatant act of defiance shattered that plan into shards certain to leave me bleeding. I had best play nice and entertain the man who would soon be my mate.

I shuddered as the suds ran down my body and into the drain, mirroring my hopes and wishes.

In thirty minutes, I was dressed in a pale blue sweater and faded jeans. My hair was tied into a braid, still quite damp. When I opened my door, I heard the dulcet sounds of a piano solo coming from the study where my father

## Fealty

was no doubt enjoying a snifter of cognac.

Quietly, I made my way down the stairs, praying my steps would go unnoticed. The last thing I wanted was another bout with my father. He would certainly comment on my damp hair.

I opened the front door and slipped outside before closing it softly behind me. So far so good, I thought.

My bike protested with a groan as I kicked the stand up and pushed it onto the drive. In two minutes, I would be free.