



*The Gypsy Casts
a Spell*

*By
Elizabeth McKenna*

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A short story

by

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Vadoma Tait has the “sight” and has seen her own death. On what she thinks is her last day on earth, her cousin stabs a man during the annual autumn fair. In her remaining hours, Vadoma sets out to save him from the gallows. When the village’s Marquis rebuffs her pleas for mercy, she turns to desperate measures.

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To my sister. Thank you.

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Chapter 1

On the day she was to die, Vadoma Taita awoke to pale morning light. Annoyed it was past sunrise, she chided herself on such laziness. Every minute of the day needed to be savored—not spent sleeping. She placed her hands over her heart and felt the strong, steady, beat. When would it stop? It didn't seem possible, but she knew it would happen.

Breakfast noises came from the next room, and she stretched her arms above her head and sighed. She would miss her family the most. After her parents' death when she was only two months old, Aunt Kizzy and Uncle Boldo took her in and treated her like their own child. She was grateful for their love, and yet, she wondered if her real ma and da would know her in the afterlife.

She opened the curtains of her box bed and padded barefoot to a nearby trunk. Inside, she found her best dancing outfit. The skirt was full with red and white stripes. Vadoma ran her fingers through the thin pieces of metal she had meticulously sewn in rows around the hem. They clanged merrily at her touch, bringing back visions from all the fairs at which she had danced.

Pushing the memories away, she slipped on the skirt, a white cotton shirt, and then a bright green vest. She tugged the shirt a bit lower over her breasts until she was satisfied with the amount of fullness showing. The neckline was cut low to better entice the generosity of the men folk in the audience. She gathered up her long, dark hair and tied it in place with a red ribbon.

She dug deep into the bottom corner of the trunk where a small jewelry box lay hidden. Vadoma rubbed the intricately carved wooden top with affection. She opened it and took out her mother's gold earrings and four gold bangle bracelets that her aunt had given Vadoma on her sixteenth birthday.

Pausing in the doorway between the bedroom and the common area, her eyes took in, perhaps for the last time, the interior of the cottage where her family stayed when they weren't traveling the Scottish countryside. It was bare except for a few pieces of essential furniture, an eating table with four unmatched chairs and a long worktable holding an assortment of cooking utensils. Colorful patchwork curtains hung from the windows and provided the only decorative frills. Everything else they owned needed to be small enough to fit in the old wooden cart their donkey, Esmeralda, pulled.

A pang of dismay shot through her as she calculated the income her family would lose after she was gone. Vadoma's dancing and her Cousin Pierre's acrobatics often brought in more money than the selling of her uncle's wares.

For a few precious seconds, she allowed bitterness to replace the dismay. Since she had been old enough to understand the importance of family, she had longed to find love and have children of her own. But those were futile dreams, she thought with a shake of her head, and she refused to have anger ruin what little time she had left.

If there was any way to avoid her destiny, she would. However, she had seen her future, and now the future was here. Today would be her last and there was no way to change her sad fate. She swallowed the lump in her throat and pushed herself out to face the day.

She found her aunt stirring a kettle of porridge over the peat fire. "Good morn, Auntie. Forgive me for sleeping so late."

When Kizzy Taits turned to greet her niece, her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Ah! Look at you, my handsome girl. Is there something I should know? Have you finally set your sights on a man?"

Vadoma laughed, but then lied. “No, I felt like dressing special, that’s all. I see rich men in the crowds today. I hope to put them in the mood to lighten their purses.”

“That explains why my left palm is itching. I’ve never doubted your sight. We’ll tell your cousin and uncle to perform their best today, and the money will flow.”

Nodding guiltily, Vadoma snuck a spoonful of the porridge before grabbing two nearby water buckets. She went out the rear of their thatched cottage on Gypsy Row and made her way to a dirt path that led to the Bowmont River, which ran alongside the small town of Kirk Yetholm. Fog hung on the rolling green hills below the Cheviot Mountains. She shivered in the cool air and wished she had remembered her shawl.

When she reached the river’s edge, she smiled at an elderly woman kneeling over the water washing clothes. “Good morn, neighbor. How are you?”

The wrinkles in the woman’s face shifted into a grimace as she straightened and placed a claw-like hand on her lower back. “Ack, lassie, the gods have cursed me again. I could barely get out of bed, but at least I’m alive.”

Vadoma clicked her tongue. “Do you need more ointment for the pain? I could bring some by on the way to the fairgrounds.”

“Oh, no, now don’t bother with me. Get yourself to the fair. Perhaps this year you will catch yourself a husband, eh?” The old woman’s laugh started as a high cackle but ended in a choking cough.

Vadoma dropped her buckets and pounded the neighbor’s hunched back until the fit passed.

“A comely girl like you should be taking care of her own family by now. You should make up one of your love potions,” the old woman suggested with a wag of her crooked finger.

“The one you made for Helene Andree worked. Did you see how big she is with child?”

“Ay, that is a good idea,” Vadoma agreed and forced a smile. “Well, my aunt will be needing this water. I shouldn’t keep her waiting.”

She picked up the buckets and filled them from the river. Walking toward the cottage, she watched the townspeople in the distance. The autumn harvest had been pulled in and now it was fair time. With the Scottish village of Kirk Yetholm only a mile from the English border, its fair attracted droves of visitors from both countries. Vadoma could feel the excitement as the townspeople readied to sell their goods and make some well-needed money.

She stopped short at the sight of two noblemen and their valets. Biting her lower lip, she frowned. The paunchy, gray-haired gentleman who stood bored with arms akimbo was the Duke of Roxburghe, but she didn’t recognize the younger one. He was obviously upper class, but his stance implied a man comfortable with manual labor. Whereas his elder companion appeared soft to the point of femininity, he looked as hard as the cliffs of Berwickshire with muscles straining the cloth of his shirt. A leather cord held his unruly red hair and reminded her of the Highland men she had met on her travels.

As she stared, the group turned in her direction. She quickly bowed her head, but not before she saw the Duke’s plump lip curl in contempt. It was well known the Duke despised mingling with the country folk.

“Have you seen enough, Tweeddale?” the Duke asked, his voice thick with impatience. “I would like to return to Floors Castle before we’re pick pocketed.”

So, the rumors were true. The Marquis of Tweeddale's son had come home to claim his inheritance. Would he be a more just lord than his father was?

"I was hoping to stay for the fair," the Marquis replied. "It would give me a chance to meet some of my renters."

The Duke sneezed noisily.

"Bloody country air," he sniffed and wiped his dripping nose on a lace handkerchief. "Let your land steward deal with the commoners. That's what your father did."

The Marquis stiffened, but kept his tone even. "Ay, but I would like to run things my way, with all due respect, of course."

The Duke waved the handkerchief in the air and sighed. "As you wish."

The Marquis inclined his head in Vadoma's direction. "Look, there's one of my renters now."

He smiled as he approached her, ignoring the Duke's grumbling behind him.

Vadoma set down her buckets and dropped into a curtsy.

"Good morn, miss," the Marquis greeted her. For a brief moment, his eyes lingered on her exposed cleavage before reluctantly moving to her face. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am George Hays, the 8th Marquis of Tweeddale."

Vadoma exchanged a surprised look with the Marquis' valet who could only shrug his shoulders in response. She didn't know how to answer to his informality, so when she said nothing, he frowned.

He tried again. "Do you live in town?"

“Maybe she doesn’t understand English.” The Duke peered around the Marquis, but kept his distance as if afraid he would catch something from her. “These gypsies have their own gutter language, you know.”

Vadoma glared at the Duke and then answered the Marquis in a clear voice. “I am Vadoma Taits of the Romani Lautari tribe and I live on Gypsy Row.”

The Marquis nodded in satisfaction. “Will you be attending the fair, Vadoma Taits of the Romani Lautari tribe?”

Now she gazed icily at the Marquis, unsure if he was making fun of her. “Ay, my family will be performing at it.”

“Oh? What kind of a performance?” His deep amber eyes lit up with interest, and he bounced on the balls of his feet. “Do you tell fortunes? I have seen other gypsies do that.”

Unnerved by his boyish enthusiasm, she hesitated before answering him.

“I see the future sometimes, like other *Romas*.” Her tribe considered “gypsy” to be a slur against their heritage. They were “Roma” and proud of it.

“Tell me mine,” the Marquis commanded. “What do you see? What will happen to me?”

Vadoma shook her head. On any other day, she would be afraid of the repercussions of her refusal, but her impending death made her fearless. She did not like to be rude though, so she explained, “It does not work that way. I do not command my visions—they command me.”

Disappointment showed on the younger lord’s face. The Duke clapped a pudgy hand on his shoulder. “Don’t fret, Tweeddale. At least you didn’t lose any money in the deal. Consider yourself lucky the lass didn’t cheat you out of a few shillings.”

Her fists balled at the Duke's words. Before she could decide if the offer was wise, she asked, "Perhaps my lord would like his palm read? It's not as true as a vision but sometimes as satisfactory. No charge."

The Marquis smiled like a child receiving a present and held out his right hand, palm up. Ignoring it, she reached for his left, which the Roma knew showed a person's character. She was more interested in what kind of a man the Marquis was than what his future would be.

His hand dwarfed hers, and the skin felt rough to the touch. The lack of smoothness surprised her, but she didn't dwell on this discovery. Instead, holding his hand palm to palm, she absorbed his energy. She rarely read a person's chakra, as the person could be depressed, but in this case, Vadoma thought it necessary to take the risk.

She uncovered his hand and began to examine the lines etched on his palm.

"Well, what do you see?" He shifted closer until their heads almost touched.

As his breath warmed her cheek, she lost focus. For a moment, she laid in a plush bed with red velvet drapes, wrapped in the Marquis' arms. She felt happy and loved, as they talked of their future together.

Bewildered by the vision, she forced herself back to the present. "Your Life line shows you are of good health and of a confident character. It has several branches, which indicate many long journeys and changes in your life."

The Duke made an unpleasant snorting sound. "The local gossip could have told her that."

Her eyes flashed in the Duke's direction before she continued. "Your Fate line is deep and unbroken. You've the ability to succeed in anything you try."

"Of course, he does. He is a *Marquis*," the Duke muttered.

“Please, Duke, let her finish,” the Marquis admonished.

“Your line of Mercury shows you are intelligent. You love to read.”

The Duke let out a loud sigh. “The library at Yester House is no secret. It holds more books than my own.”

She gritted her teeth to steady her temper. “However, your Family line is troublesome. You’re not close to those who share your name.”

This time the Duke laughed. “More gossip. It doesn’t take gypsy blood to know that about you and your dearly departed father.”

Vadoma studied his palm for a few more moments. “That’s all I see.”

She dropped his hand and laced her fingers together in front of her. Focusing on the ground, she hoped they wouldn’t notice the second lie of the day on her face.

The Marquis stared at his palm for a moment longer, his brows creased in thought. Finally, he said, “Thank you. Maybe we will see each other again at the fair?”

Vadoma looked up and gave him a small smile. “Perhaps, my lord.”

She let the group move on before she picked up her buckets and continued home. Until now, she had never held back information during a reading, believing all knowledge—good and bad—needed to be relayed. However, with the Marquis, for some reason she couldn’t speak what she saw. She couldn’t tell him that his Girdle of Venus line was longer and deeper than Kosta Turnbull’s who had fathered ten children before the age of thirty. Nor could she tell him that his Ring of Solomon showed more wisdom than was expected for such a young man.

Vadoma sighed. His chakra still coursed through her, leaving her flustered. Considering the visible strength from his broad shoulders down to his well-muscled legs showing below his kilt, she shouldn’t be surprised at the power of his internal energy. She rolled her shoulders,

trying to shake herself free, but it was no use. Her last day on earth would be shared with the Marquis, whether she liked it or not.

Chapter 2

By midday, the fairgrounds buzzed with activity. From the rows upon rows of stalls, sellers hawked everything from cheese to horses. Townsfolk and visitors trampled back and forth, haggling with the vendors and debating whether to part with their harvest wages. The ground soon became a mixture of mud and animal waste, while the air took on the scent of human sweat, cooked food, and feces.

Vadoma and her family had set up a small stage in the middle of the chaos. For their performances, Pierre warmed up the audience with flips and twists, and then ended with a humorous tightrope act. The children loved his antics, emitting high-pitched squeals of laughter. Vadoma would follow and sing several folk songs. For the grand finale, she would perform a traditional Roma dance accompanied by her uncle on the violin, while Pierre circulated with a basket to collect any coins the people felt obligated to give up in a show of appreciation. Off to the side of the stage, her aunt sold the brooms and horn spoons that her uncle had made. In between the shows, Vadoma told fortunes for a small price. All in all, it was a system that worked. They didn't have many personal possessions, but they didn't starve either.

Halfway through a ballad about a young woman rejected by her lover, Vadoma saw the Marquis. He stood motionless, watching her with arms crossed against his chest. She shut her eyes to concentrate on the words of the song and block out the desire she felt coming off her new lord despite the physical distance between them.

To pay homage to the importance of the day, during the finale she danced until she was winded and glowing. This was her favorite part of the show, and she gave herself over to her uncle's music and let the rousing rhythms move through her body. She felt fully alive and stretched the moment out as long as she could until finally, it was over and the applause swept over her. She curtsied low to the crowd in thanks and then hurried off the stage.

Before she could wipe the sweat from her face, the Marquis reached her side.

"That was wonderful. I have never heard a voice as sweet as yours."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, my lord." To discourage his friendliness, she moved to pass him, but the Marquis grabbed her arm.

"Do you perform again so soon? I would like to talk—about the town. I've been gone many years and so much has changed." He gave her a hopeful smile.

She had never met a nobleman so unaware of social customs. Exasperated, she took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. His scent was as powerful as his chakra. A rush of lightheadedness overcame her, and she wavered on her feet.

The Marquis seized both her elbows to hold her steady. "Are you ill?"

She nodded, and the Marquis guided her to the edge of the stage. She sat for a moment and rested her head in her hands until the spots before her eyes disappeared. What she really needed was to be rid of the Marquis. How could Fate be so cruel as to torment her with this man on her last day? Shouldn't she be allowed to pass on to the next life in a state of calmness and tranquility?

As she considered ways to escape the Marquis, who was still staring intently at her, sounds of a fight breaking out came from the far side of the stage. Alarmed, she forgot her current problem and ran across the platform toward the commotion.

“Pierre!”

Two townsmen held her struggling cousin by the arms. At their feet, a stranger lay motionless. Dark blood seeped from a wound in his side and formed a pool in the dirt.

The constable of Kirk Yetholm pushed his way through the crowd encircling the men. When he reached the center, his eyes widened. He picked up a knife from the ground and asked, “Did you do this, boy?”

Pierre scowled at the men around him. “Ay, you all saw me. There’s no denying it, but I had good reason. That man murdered my kin.”

Vadoma sank to her knees. “I don’t understand. Auntie told me my parents’ death was an accident.”

“Twenty years ago to the day, Vaddie, I swear on their graves. His name was Charles Gordon and he was a murderer. Old Rowena Douglas pointed him out while you were dancing. She told me that Gordon was drunk and challenged your da to a fight. Your ma tried to stop them and in the scuffle, Gordon stabbed them both. He wasn’t even punished because it was only gypsy scum that he killed.” Pierre jutted out his chin. “I’m not sorry he’s dead.”

“Pierre, what have you done?” she moaned. “You’ve sentenced yourself to death!”

“Constable, take the boy into custody.” The Marquis pointed at the men holding Pierre. “You two, follow with the deceased. I will meet you at the justice’s cottage.”

Vadoma grabbed a fistful of the Marquis’ kilt. “No, my lord, please! He did it for me. Arrest me instead. I beg you!”

He gave her a sympathetic look and then freed himself from her grasp. “No, lassie, he must pay for what he has done. ‘Tis the law.”

Her aunt’s heartbroken wailing brought Vadoma to her feet.

“My boy! My boy!” Kizzy’s small fists thumped her husband’s chest with every word as if he was the cause of her distress. “He’s only fifteen. It’s not right. He didn’t know what he was doing.”

Vadoma jumped off the stage and wrapped her arms around her aunt. “Shhh, Auntie, it will be all right.”

“How? How can it be made right? My boy’s going to die.” Kizzy clutched fistfuls of her dark hair and let out another long cry.

Vadoma grabbed her aunt’s hands and held them tight against her heart.

“I promise you, I will free Pierre. He’ll not die.” She motioned to her uncle. “Go home now and wait for me.”

“Be careful, child,” Boldo warned, “We couldn’t bear to lose you, too.”

She nodded and gave them both a quick kiss on the cheeks. As her uncle guided her tear-blinded aunt in the direction of their cottage, despair rooted her feet to the ground. Now what? How would she fulfill her promise before her time on earth ran out?

Though her people lived amongst the Scots and English, and bent to their common law, they believed they had a right to punish their own when the need arose. They resented any interference from the locals. She had to get Pierre back so her tribe could decide the rightful penalty.

The Roma were a passionate people, prone to fighting first and justifying later. Feuds often turned violent with fatal consequences. Revenge went hand in hand with honor. If the man had truly killed her parents, then she knew Pierre felt righteous in his actions. The tribe would still need to judge him, but death was not the automatic sentence.

Without a clear plan in mind, she headed toward the justice's cottage. Once there, she was dismayed to see another fight brewing between members of her tribe and the companions of the dead man. Rowena Douglas, who started Pierre on his murderous quest, led the battle of insults. Though shriveled with age, her voice rang out above the others, as she insisted Charles Gordon was a murderer first.

Vadoma didn't see her cousin or the men who had led him away. Assuming everyone was in the justice's cottage, she was almost to the door when a hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her backward.

"Here's the wronged lass," cried Rowena, holding up Vadoma's arm. "Here's the lass who lost her parents before she was weaned from her mother's breast. She never knew the love of her own ma and da. Do you deny her the satisfaction of revenge?"

"No!" the crowd answered vehemently.

"Where is your proof?" shouted a stranger.

Rowena tapped her temple. "Here. You don't forget the face of a murderer. Charles Gordon got what he deserved."

The crowd surged forward and encircled the dead man's friends. Fearing more bloodshed, Vadoma yanked free of the old woman's grasp and ran to the justice's cottage. She pounded on the door and called out, "Please, let me in."

After a moment, it opened to reveal the constable.

"What do you want, gypsy?" he asked with a sneer.

She motioned at the crowd. "You must do something, before more get hurt."

The constable frowned and surveyed the situation. It seemed everyone who had come for the fair was now in front of the justice's cottage. The once festive mood had turned foul.

“My lords?” the constable addressed the Duke and the Marquis who sat at a wooden table conferring with the justice.

“We should hang the boy immediately,” the Duke said without hesitation. “When the peasants see what happens to murderers, they will go home peacefully.”

“No!” Vadoma cried. On the floor in the far corner, Pierre sat curled up in a ball, looking every bit as despondent as she felt. She pushed the constable out of the way and rushed to his side. “He doesn’t deserve death.”

“What would you have us do, lass?” the Marquis asked. “He took another’s life.”

His eyes showed compassion, but his mouth spoke the reality of the situation.

“It’s not right that you punish one of us,” she insisted, placing a hand over her heart. “My cousin must be tried in a Roma court. The tribe must decide his fate. It’s our way.”

“Ay, but it’s not *our* way,” the Marquis said gently.

The Duke rose from the table. “That settles it. Constable, take some men and make the necessary preparations. I want this done before sunset.”

“Please, wait,” Vadoma pleaded. “Grant me one request.”

Losing his temper, the Duke shouted, “Silence, gypsy, or you will join your kin at the gallows.”

For a split second, disgust flashed on the Marquis’ face. He rose to his full height and filled the room with his physical power. “With all due respect, it is my village and I would like to hear what she has to say.”

She stared warily at the two men, wondering if the Duke would submit to the younger lord. “Let my cousin have the rest of today for his goodbyes. You’ll ease the heartache of his mother and he’ll end up just as dead. One day shouldn’t matter.”

After a moment's consideration, the Marquis nodded. "Ay, I will grant your request. You have until tomorrow at midday." He turned to the constable and commanded, "Take some men and disperse the crowd. We don't need any more bloodshed today."

Holding back her tears, Vadoma whispered in Pierre's ear, "I'll send your ma and da to you. Do not lose hope, cousin, for I have an idea."

Confusion showed on Pierre's face, but he left his questions unspoken. Instead, he clung to her for a long moment before letting go.

She rose and forced her body to move away from her kin and toward the door.

"I am truly sorry it has to be this way," the Marquis said to her back.

Her shoulders stiffened. The vilest Roma curse formed on her lips. She turned to unleash it, but when she saw the sincerity on his face, the words died before she could speak them.

Flustered, she acknowledged him with a curt nod before departing.

Chapter 3

Vadoma ran home to give the news to her aunt and uncle. After they hurried off to the justice's cottage, she tore apart the kitchen gathering the things she would need for the first part of her plan. As she placed two rose petals, three apple seeds, a blue colored piece of glass, a heart shaped stone, and a dove's feather on the worktable, her gold bangles clanged merrily, unaware of the seriousness of the situation. The metallic sound cut through her frayed nerves. Swearing, she slid them off her wrists and tossed them onto the eating table on her way to the bedroom.

She dumped the contents of her trunk on the bedroom floor.

"Please, please, please..." she implored, tossing clothing and keepsakes to the side. With a cry of triumph, she found what she was searching for, a cord plaited from red, orange, and pink thread and a pink drawstring bag. Before returning to the kitchen area, she slipped off her dancing skirt and replaced it with a plain brown one.

Back at the worktable, she used the cord to tie the rose petals and the feather together. She held her hands above the objects and forced the distress from her mind so as not to taint the love potion. Satisfied, she scooped everything into the drawstring bag and scented it with four drops of rose oil.

Next, she shook a small amount of chamomile leaves from a battered tin into a leather pouch. She reached up to a high shelf and rejected bottles until she found a skinny red vial half-full of liquid. After adding it to the collection on the worktable, she scanned the room.

A battered cupboard stood off in the corner. She opened the bottom doors wide and pushed aside a pile of folded blankets. Behind it, two bottles of whiskey stood hidden. She held them up to the weak window light and picked the fullest one, tucking it under her arm while she replaced the other.

She put all the items she had assembled, along with some rope, in a satchel and then donned a long, dark cloak. With a final look at her home, she hefted the satchel to her shoulder and headed out the door and toward the town square.

When Vadoma entered the Cross Keys Inn, everything came to a stop. The room previously filled with merry customers eating and drinking now held silence. She frowned and approached a serving girl. "I need to see the king."

The girl pointed to an open doorway across the tavern. As Vadoma walked toward the side room, both support and condemnation displayed on the faces she passed. She paused before entering and sneaked a peek over her shoulder. A few folks nodded their encouragement. She rubbed her palms dry on her skirt. She had never spoken to the king of the Romani Lautari tribe alone before. Considering the trouble her family had caused today, she wasn't sure how he would receive her.

In the middle of the room, William Faa II sat at a table with a pint of home brew and a half-eaten meal. He was a short, round man with a long beard and snowy-white hair that fell in braids to the middle of his back. Three mutts, their ribs showing through dirty fur, begged for scraps at his feet. For as long as she could remember, he had been their king.

Vadoma approached him slowly and then fell into a deep curtsy. Underneath her skirt, she fought to keep her knees still. With her head lowered, she waited for him to speak.

When he did, his voice came out clear and strong. “Vadoma Taits.”

“Ay, sir.”

“You know I cannot interfere with their laws.”

“Ay, sir.”

“Yet, here you are.” He stroked his beard. “Why?”

She lifted her chin and met his stare. “Because you are a smuggler.”

The king’s hand stopped in mid-air. Though his expression remained stern, the corners of his mouth twitched in amusement.

“You remind me of another young woman from long ago—one who is no longer with us.” Seconds ticked by as his eyes bore into hers. “How does what I am help you?”

“When I free my cousin, get him to America.” It was common knowledge the king smuggled Scottish whiskey to the far off country to avoid taxes. She knew she did not ask the impossible.

Still, the king’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “How are you going to free him?”

Vadoma kept her face blank and adjusted the satchel on her shoulder. “Leave that to me. I only need to know if you’ll do what I have asked.”

The king gave her a small nod. “Ay, girl, for your dear parents, I’ll do this.”

With her business with the king settled, Vadoma next started down the road to Floors Castle, where the Marquis was staying with the Duke. It would take her until sunset to reach it, but that was fine. She needed the cover of darkness for the remainder of her plan.

When she reached the gates of the castle, she stopped to marvel at its grandness. The main building stood three stories high, with peaked towers on each corner. Two matching

smaller buildings grew out from its sides like muscle-bound arms. Local stone had been cut to make the impenetrable light-colored walls that over the generations had kept the nobles safe.

Servants told the villagers of wondrous gardens filled with a colorful palette of flowers, along with oak, lime, and chestnut trees. The River Tweed moved lazily through the grounds, attracting an abundance of wildlife. During particularly hard times, a few foolish souls would try to hunt the land. When caught—and they always were—the punishment of death by hanging was swiftly meted out.

Off to the side of the closed gates two guards, one tall and the other short, loafed against the stone wall. On the road to the castle, she had debated the story she would tell to get past these men. Should she use tears or womanly charm? Which would they fall to? Deciding, she pinched her skin until tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

“Oh, please, please, you must help me,” she called out with desperation in her voice.

“What’s the problem, lassie?” the smaller of the two asked.

“I don’t know what to do. I’m so afraid.”

She covered her face and moved her shoulders as if crying, and then peeked through her fingers to see the guards’ reaction.

They exchanged puzzled glances.

“What’re you going on about?” the bigger man asked.

“I must see my sister. She’s a maid for the Duke.” She paused to wail for effect. “She’s to be married in a fortnight, but today I saw her betrothed with another girl at the fair. My father’s going to kill him!”

“Ay, that’s a mess, but we can’t let you in without permission,” the smaller one said with a shake of his head. “We could lose our posts.”

“Or worse,” the bigger one added.

“Oh, but please. I have to warn her.” She forced more tears from her eyes.

The smaller one shuffled his feet in the dirt. “Lassie, we want to help...but...”

Vadoma opened her satchel and removed the whiskey bottle. Pretending to be torn on whether to offer it to the guards, she finally held it up. “I’ll give you this if you let me pass.”

The bigger man rubbed a rough hand across his mouth and then nudged his partner who shrugged in response. With a quick look around, he grabbed the bottle and said with a nod in the direction of the castle, “Hurry now and don’t let no one see you.”

Vadoma dropped a curtsy in thanks and ran through the gates.

She paused at the edge of a grove of trees after working her way through the shadows to the rear of the castle. In a nearby courtyard, several servants went about their evening business. Her fingers worried the coarse cloth of her cloak while she waited for the help to disappear. When the courtyard finally emptied, she headed for a side door.

She walked through the hallways as if she belonged, doubling back a few times when she took obvious wrong turns. At last, she reached the kitchen area, her intended destination. In the large room, a lone housemaid rested her feet, softly humming a Roma folk song.

Vadoma thanked the heavens. She knew several of her tribe worked at the castle and had hoped she would find one of them.

“Excuse me,” she called out softly and entered the room. Despite her efforts not to startle the girl, the maid jumped visibly. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but I need your help.”

Puzzled, the girl looked around the room, expecting Vadoma to be addressing someone else. “Miss?”

“Ay, I mean you. I need *your* help.” She hesitated, unsure how much to tell. “Something bad happened to my cousin today. Tomorrow, he’ll be put to death unless I can convince the Marquis to change his mind.”

The girl’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Oh, how awful for you, but what can I do?”

“Does the Marquis take any food or drink before retiring for the night? Maybe tea or liquor?”

The girl’s eyes narrowed at the question, but she nodded. “Ay, the past few nights he’s taken tea and a biscuit. He has a sweet tooth that one does.”

Vadoma felt a stirring of hope. Maybe her plan would work after all. She dumped the contents of the satchel onto the worktable. Holding up the red vial and the leather pouch, she said, “I need you to use these for his tea, tonight.” At the alarmed look on the maid’s face, she quickly added, “It won’t harm him. It’s only to make him sleep soundly. It’s chamomile leaves and poppy syrup.”

“Why do you want him to do that?”

“It’s best you don’t know. Otherwise, he could blame you,” Vadoma explained, fighting the impatience that was creeping into her voice. “Please believe me, though, when I say, I’ll not hurt him.”

She silently wondered if that would be her third lie of the day.

The girl bit her lip and considered Vadoma’s request. She pointed to the pink bag. “What’s in the other pouch?”

“Ay, this is for you. It’s a love potion guaranteed to work on the most stubborn of hearts.” She watched the girl’s face change from suspicion to curiosity and smiled slyly. “You have someone in mind, don’t you?”

The girl shrugged and ran a finger along the edge of the table.

“You wear this around your neck when he’s near. I promise he’ll be in love with you before the next full moon.”

Finally, the girl nodded and picked up the pink pouch. She placed it around her neck and tucked it under her chemise.

Relieved, Vadoma smiled. “Thank you. Now, I’ve only one more thing to ask.”

Chapter 4

Vadoma waited, curled up in the corner of a dark sitting room in the same wing as the Marquis' bedchambers. Wishing she could light a fire in the cold hearth, she adjusted her hood and pulled the cloak tighter around her shivering body.

Two knocks sounded on the door followed by silence and then three more. The girl had delivered the tea as promised. Now it was up to Vadoma to finish what she had started.

After what seemed an eternity, a clock chimed the midnight hour. Vadoma rose from her hiding spot and stretched her cramped limbs. She crossed to the door and laid an ear to it. When she heard nothing, she inched open the door to peek out. The dimmed oil lamps in the hallway revealed only deep, flickering shadows. She begged Fate for a few more minutes of life before creeping on silent feet to the Marquis' bedchambers.

At his door, she once again listened for any telltale sounds, but all was quiet. She hunkered down and felt around the floor until her fingers grasped the cold metal of a key. Vadoma silently thanked the maid who had dutifully fulfilled all that had been asked of her. She slipped into the room and locked the door behind her.

She stood for a moment, allowing her eyes to adjust to the soft firelight glowing from the hearth. What she finally saw was a room fit for a king. Regal red was the dominant color from the silk-covered chairs to the damask wallpaper. Matching red velvet drapes framed the large four-poster bed where the Marquis lay asleep on his back, his tangled hair spread across the

starch white pillows. The room celebrated manliness with its heavy, dark wood furniture and gold-framed hunting scenes hanging on the walls.

Though the richness of the room fascinated her, the sleeping nobleman held her stare the longest. Earlier in the day, she had merely guessed at the strength he possessed. Now, as he lay bare-chested despite the chill in the air, his hard curves were on full display.

Vadoma closed her eyes, but the vision of the Marquis' virile body remained, refusing to be dismissed so easily. With a shake of her head, she approached the bedside. From the satchel she still carried, she removed the last object, a long piece of rope. Taking hold of the Marquis' wrist with her finger and thumb, she lifted it slowly and tested the strength of her sleeping potion. When he didn't wake, she tied the wrist to the nearest bedpost. She moved to the other side of the bed and repeated her actions. A small grumble escaped from the Marquis' lips, but nothing more.

Now, she needed to wake him. She reached forward and poked his ribs, but as flesh touched flesh, his energy surged up her arm. Startled, she jerked back, almost landing on her backside.

"Gajo!" she thought. "Why does this man's chakra continue to vex me?"

Glaring at the Marquis, she picked up a penknife from the writing desk in the corner. Her finger plucked the blade, testing the sharpness. It would do.

It took three tries and a draw of blood before his golden lashes flickered open. His eyes first revealed confusion and then sparked with anger, deepening the amber to a scorched brown. He tried to move his arms in defense, but the ropes held tight.

"What's the meaning of this? Untie me this instant."

“Silence,” Vadoma replied from the shadows. Her voice sounded calm to her ears, belying the turmoil in her stomach. “You’re in no position for demands.”

“Who’s there? Show yourself, coward.” He spit out the last word in a show of disgust.

Vadoma stepped forward.

The Marquis’ eyebrows shot up, but his face showed no fear. “Ay, it is an angel of Death. So, you are to take me in my bed like a feeble invalid instead of a conquering soldier on the battlefield. How cruel and heartless.”

Vadoma lowered the hood of her cloak to reveal her face.

He shook his head. “No, not Death, but a sorceress or perhaps a she-devil. Killing me will not save your kin.”

“I’m not here to kill you, my lord.”

He lifted his chin at the blade she still held. “Yet there is blood on my sheets.”

“Only a little,” she replied defensively with a toss of her head. “You would not wake.”

“I am awake now. So, if you are not here to kill me, then what?” The Marquis waved his hands in a circle.

Vadoma’s agitation tangled her thoughts and tied her tongue. She didn’t have the Irish gift of gab, yet she needed the right words or all would be lost. How could she convince him to go against his laws? If she was honest, this part of the plan had never been set in her mind. Giving up on eloquence, she simply said, “I mean to have you see reason.”

The Marquis’ eyes opened wide and he let out a harsh laugh. “Reason, you say? A reasonable person would not hog-tie their lord. But no matter, I cannot free your kin. He took a man’s life. He must be punished.”

“You could let him escape. No one needs to know the truth.” Now that the moment to beg had arrived, she felt her strength waning. She grabbed one of the bed’s wooden posts to steady herself. Hoping they weren’t her last words, she said in a rush, “If he was tried in a Roma court, exile would be his punishment. I’ve arranged for his passage to America. You’ll never see him again.”

The Marquis was silent for a moment. “You must love him very much to take such risks, but dead or exiled, you’ll never see him again either.”

Her knuckles turned white, as she gripped the post tighter. “I love him with all my heart, but I’m to blame for his crime. I must at least save his life.”

“And why would I do this for you?” He cocked his head to the side. “Am I granting your request out of the goodness of my heart? My father would hang you alongside your kin.”

“Ay, you speak the truth there. Your father was no saint.” Her eyes locked with his, remembering what his palm revealed earlier that morning. “But we both know you’re not your father.”

The Marquis swung his hands side to side. “So untie me and I will consider your request.”

She shook her head in response. “You must swear first that you’ll let my cousin escape.”

Through narrow eyes, he weighed her demand. Finally, he agreed with a shrug of his broad shoulders. “I swear.”

Vadoma relaxed for the first time since her last day on earth had begun. “You’re indeed a kind and just lord.”

A small smile played across the Marquis’ lips. “Maybe so, but I am also a man. If you want this favor, you will need to give me something in return.”

Confused, she wondered what she could possibly have that the Marquis would want.

Reading her mind, he answered, "You. You must lay with me tonight."

Her eyes widened in disbelief and then her fists clenched.

"No one needs to know," he said, using her own words against her.

"I would know."

"Hmmm, so you do not agree? You love your virtue more than your kin? I'm sorry to hear that."

Vadoma considered the penknife she still held, watching the firelight bounce off the blade. It would do no good to kill him, and it was a small price to pay for Pierre's freedom. But she had never been with a man, never even had a beau. Curiosity itched at her mind. For the brief time she had left on earth, she would know what it felt like to be a woman. Perhaps she would even die during the act. That made her smile. It would serve the scoundrel right for demanding such an exchange.

"I didn't say no."

"Then say, yes, Vadoma Taits of the of the Lautari tribe."

She was surprised he remembered her full name. If it weren't for what he had just demanded from her, she would think he was truly different from all the others who treated her kind worse than dogs.

Resigned, she put down the knife and slipped off her cloak. With a snap of her wrist, she pulled the covers from his lower half and then hiked up her skirt to straddle him. "Let's get this over with."

"You aren't going to untie me first?" the Marquis asked in disbelief. "It would be more pleasurable if I had the use of my hands."

“The animals have taught me that you only need the use of one thing to get your pleasure. You should have been more specific about the rules before you made the deal.”

Despite the insult, he laughed. “You gypsies are known for your cleverness and it is rightly deserved, but we do it my way or not at all.”

How could she let this stranger touch places that were meant only for a husband? Her eyes moved over his muscular torso and arms, avoiding his lower half. She was not ready to look in that direction. When she reached his face, she found a mixture of kindness and amusement.

“At least I am not the Duke,” he said with a smile.

Despite the situation, she laughed. “If you were, you’d be dead by now.”

“Untie me, gypsy queen.” Though his voice was soft, it still held the power of one who was used to being obeyed. “I will not hurt you. I promise.”

Reluctantly, Vadoma slipped the knots of the rope and freed him. He rubbed his wrists to get the blood flowing again. Unable to meet his gaze, she waved at the bed and asked, “Now what, my lord?”

He patted the space beside him. “Now, you lay with me.”

She squeezed her eyes shut before easing her skirt down over her hips. She stepped free and tossed it on top of her cloak. Afraid she would falter, she quickly removed her vest and then lifted her shirt over her head. Holding the thin material over her bare breasts like armor, her breath came in short gasps as fear took over her body.

She heard the bed creak and then felt the Marquis’ legs on either side of her thighs. When he touched her hands, she jolted. Still, he came at her, gently loosening her death grip on the cloth, the only protection her innocence had left.

She stood before him in all her nakedness with eyes closed. Could she get through the whole deed without opening them? Maybe it would make it easier...

He held her hands, palms up. His lips softly brushed the inside of each wrist and then the crooks of her elbows. As he slowly ran his fingertips up the length of her arms, sparks from his chakra warmed her shivering skin. For a moment, his hands lingered at her throat and she wondered if he meant to choke her, but then they continued over her cheeks and into her hair. No, she would not get off so easily.

His hands left her hair and skimmed her shoulders, continuing their exploration, finally stopping at her breasts. His thumbs brushed over her nipples and an unfamiliar, though not entirely unpleasant, sensation shot through her lower body. Her mind had just begun to drift when one thumb was replaced with his warm mouth. As his tongue and teeth had their way with her nipple, she bit her bottom lip to keep the moan from escaping her lips. Her ragged breathing was no longer from fear.

Rocking on her toes, she reached out until her hands found his shoulders. Though his mouth remained on her breast, his hands moved to her buttocks, gliding over her smooth skin. Leaving her backside, he ventured to her thighs. Up and down his fingers stroked until finally, he reached between her legs and cupped her most sacred part in his large hand.

When he slid his finger inside, Vadoma gasped in shock. His fingers played, teasing her body with sensation after glorious sensation. She dug her fingers into his shoulders and arched her back, hoping it would never end. It was like the joy she felt when dancing, only a thousand times better.

When her insides exploded, she thought she had finally died and cried out in a mixture of alarm and ecstasy. When her heart resumed beating, her eyes fluttered open. The Marquis gave her a wolfish grin and in one quick move, she found herself lying on her back in his bed.

“My turn, gypsy queen.”

He lowered his head and kissed her. Like before, he was gentle at first, his lips slowly caressing hers. Nevertheless, with each touch, he became more demanding as his desire rose.

“You bewitched me from the moment I first met you,” the Marquis whispered in her ear. “Never have I known such beauty.”

Vadoma opened her thighs and grabbed his hips. When he entered her, they gasped in unison. She raised her hips and met his thrusts, and when he came, he cried her name. Spent, he collapsed on his back and hugged her to his body.

A tear rolled down Vadoma’s cheek and landed on his chest.

Feeling the wetness, he lifted her chin and searched her eyes. “Was it that horrible? I thought you enjoyed yourself.”

She let out a bitter laugh. “It was everything I had hoped love would be.”

“Then I don’t understand.” He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips. “Why are you sad?”

“Because I’ll never feel this way again. I’ll never love and marry and have children.” Her voice caught in her throat. “Tonight is the end of my life.”

His hand tightened protectively around her fingers. “You mean to harm yourself? I told you no one will know. You’ll not be shamed.”

“I will not cause my own death, but there is no escaping what is to be. Thank you for making my last hours so happy—and for my cousin’s life. Do not forget our deal.”

“Ay, of course, I will honor my word, but I still don’t understand.”

She did not explain further, feigning sleep instead. If the older women spoke the truth, he would join her in no time. Then she would slip away to get word to Pierre and King Faa. Her cousin would be saved and she could rest in peace.

As she waited for the Marquis’ breathing to turn heavy, she fought her own body’s weariness. Losing the battle, she fell into a deep sleep and dreamed.

Laughing, Vadoma raced along the stone path. Tall hedgerows formed the walls of the garden maze, twisting and turning into an intricate geometric pattern. A little boy ran in front of her, his ginger hair blazing in the summer sun. He looked over his shoulder and screamed in delight. From around the corner, a giant of a man stepped out and swooped the boy up into his arms. The boy flung his arms around the man’s neck and kissed his cheeks.

“Da! Da! You’re home!”

The man buried his face in the boy’s hair. When Vadoma caught up to them, the man’s smile widened at the sight of her. Love and longing burned bright in his amber eyes. He shifted the boy to one hip and crushed her against his chest with his free arm. He smelled of horse and leather and sweat.

He stepped away from her and put the boy on the ground. He had felt her surprise. He knelt and placed his large hands on her rounded stomach. As he kissed his unborn child hello, her heart swelled with desire and happiness.

Vadoma wiped the tears from her cheeks. Her husband was home.

She woke with a start, the dream still in her head. She sat up and placed a hand on her racing heart and willed it to slow.

The Marquis stirred next to her. His brow furrowed as he struggled awake. “Is something wrong? You look frightened.”

Vadoma stared at the man who would become her husband and the father of her children.

“Do you believe in Fate?”

The Marquis shrugged his shoulders. “Ay, I suppose. Why?”

“I think Fate just changed her fickle mind.” Laughing at his obvious confusion, she took his hand and laid it on her breast. “Have you regained your strength, my lord?”

When he gave her a wicked smile, Vadoma’s life began anew.