

TINCTURED TANDEMS

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Natasha Mishchenko and Ivana Ng

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Natasha Mishchenko and Aglika Darakchieva

Double Life and Adrenaline are the first completed fictional works done by members of the Writers of Tandem Fiction, a club at Stuyvesant High School in New York City. A tandem story is a story of any length that is written by more than one person. Usually, they are written by two people alternating paragraphs, but they may be written by any number of people. Tandem fiction is not as serious as novel writing because of the difficulties (in terms of plot) that occur in writing them. Because these stories are somewhat lengthy and because the authors want to demonstrate tandem writing in its entirety, these short stories have not been edited.

DOUBLE LIFE

Natasha Mishchenko and Ivana Ng

Passages written in italics were contributed by Natasha Mishchenko.

All other passages were written by Ivana Ng.

CHAPTER ONE

It was the night before Christmas. Unfortunately, Christmas meant nothing to the Gypsy. She had no belief in a god, but rather a belief in magic. And right she was, and she knew it too. Everyone in town knew it, and most of the people in the next town did too. She was famous, the gypsy that lived in the well...

The people of Cynthiana were terrified of the Gypsy. A generation before, the enigmatic Gypsy put a horrible curse on the town. Her lover, Ernesto, a young Italian blacksmith, had betrayed her. It was the night before Christmas, and also their first year anniversary. The Gypsy wanted to surprise Ernesto with a romantic dinner at Altobello's, an old family restaurant in the town square.

But when she met the blacksmith at his house, she found women's clothing strewn around his living room. A sultry voice coming from his bedroom called for Ernesto, and she knew that voice and she knew the ruby necklace on the floor. The woman came out to the living room, and the Gypsy's notions were correct, as always. It was her sister.

She had always been jealous of her sister. She seemed to have everything. She had a name, Lila, she had a job, waitress, she definitely had a life. Best of all and worst for her sister, Lila wasn't even a gypsy. Those are all the very reasons that the Gypsy lived in a well...How could she not? In a small town like Cynthiana she could never be accepted. It was a mutual hate, and a mutual fear. She was feared greatly by the town after her curse. But, who would not be afraid of a gypsy who let red rain flood the streets every time two people became a new couple. The red rain would not have been much, but as expected it was also cursed. Every time it rained red rain, the lands on either side of the new couple would split, and they themselves would be transported to opposite sides of the earth. This happened four times before people began trying to leave Cynthiana. Only the first couple, Ernesto and Lila themselves, ever managed to find each other again and create a plan against the Gypsy, and so the story of Ernesto and Lila's journey home found its relevance in the tale of the Gypsy.

CHAPTER TWO

It was almost a century from when the Gypsy cursed Cynthiana. On this foggy Christmas Eve, all was quiet. No one dared go out on the night before Christmas for fear of the Gypsy's wrath. She despised seeing people happy and in love, especially on the anniversary day. A decade earlier, a young expecting couple, who were staying in Cynthiana while on their way to the woman's

mother's house, decided to tour the town on Christmas Eve. They were thirsty, so they decided to take some water from the town well. No one was out so no one could inform the couple about the evil Gypsy. The next day, red rain fell. The woman left town by foot. Her belly was flat, and she was ghastly pale. None of the townsmen spoke of the incident, but from then on, no outsiders were allowed into Cynthiana, except on Christmas Eve, when no one could stop them since no one would leave home. So, when a mysterious woman in a red shawl came into town on this Christmas Eve night, no one barred her way. She coughed loudly with a raspy voice and she walked with a cane. She shivered constantly, in need of drink and warm clothing during the harsh winter. Under the moonlight, a silver chain gleamed from her neck. The ruby pendant was hidden in her corset.

There were smile wrinkles around her eyes, Lila's eyes, and a scar as long as her thumb streaked her left cheek. She was considerably aged, but there was beauty in her face. The woman looked around at the houses and stores. There was something familiar about the town, but she could not recall ever visiting there.

CHAPTER THREE

Lila wondered where she was. And where was Ernesto? She knew she had to get back home. Hopefully he was waiting for her there. She looked around. To the north, mountains, to the south, a river, too dark and dangerous to cross. To the east, well, she couldn't see anything but...was it dirt? "No no," she looked more closely, "Bugs!" she yelled. And they stretched for miles! To the west, a forest. Strange, for these types of places usually are not so...connected. She decided to walk west. From her knowledge of geography, she figured that she would have to end up back in...

Where did she live? Italy, she believed. Or...no, definitely Italy. "This must be something my sister did."

In the forest, Lila could only hear the sounds of strange creatures. However, she was not frightened. Her love for Ernesto was too strong.

She heard something behind her—a strange rustling, not of leaves, but of live insects. She turned around to see the bugs from the east, following her. She shuddered, because when she inhaled, a horrible stench seeped into her nostrils. Lila quickened her pace, even though she knew the bugs were still following her. Suddenly, she felt the bugs crawling up her bare legs. Even though her gypsy skirt swept the ground, the bugs still managed to wrap around her legs at an alarming rate. Lila wrapped her left hand around the ruby necklace on her chest, clenching it until her knuckles were white, and ran.

It was unbelievable. She gained and gained speed. Soon she was able to outrun the bugs on the ground, and then she could brush off the ones that remained in her skirt. But she faced another obstacle now. It had begun to rain, and the land she was on was absorbing it quickly. It could no longer seep in, and the land was flooding. She looked around, and in the distance, saw a single solitary tree. Her pace had not left her, and as she ran she became soaked up to her ankles. The water was waist deep when she hit the tree, and then she climbed and climbed.

She was up as high as she could go, and she was there for two days. On the third morning, she woke up in another forest that had grown from the water. Now hers was not the only tree in sight. "Oh Ernesto!" she moaned, "We will never be together! And why? Because of that bratty little sister of mine!" With all of the passion in her, she kept on moving west, and as she left the forest, she realized it would take all of her will to fight her sister and get back home. So, she walked through a mountain cave, confronted a bear, and had no trouble until she reached the desert. As before, she saw a solitary tree, this one somewhat smaller than the last. She believed that it may flood again, and went toward it. Little did she know, she was almost back home. But

unfortunately, she had fallen for the Gypsy's trap. Once she was under the tree, the heaviest branch creaked. But she did not look up until it had broken off and was inches from her. When she woke up, her memory was gone. All she remembered was the name Ernesto, but it meant nothing to her.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Ernesto,” Lila whispered over and over. “Grrr.” It was on the tip of her tongue. She was so close to remembering, but always a millimeter too short. She could see the tall man, with flowing black hair, in raggedy clothing but she could not see his face. All she could see was the bright rays of sun pouring through the tops of the trees. Crawling out from under the large tree branch that fell on her leg, she screamed in agony. A huge gash of red, dried-up blood ran down the length of her right leg.

Having lived with a gypsy sister, she knew how to make a healing potion. She limped around close to where she had fallen, gathering obscure herbs and berries. The potion soothed her pain, but only for a few minutes. Then, the pain came back, worse than before. Once again, Lila screamed and moaned in agony.

Suddenly, she heard a branch crackle and something touched her shoulder. She held her breathe, and slowly inched her to her left ankle. In her leather bootstrap, she had a small knife. With great speed and agility, she sprang up—forgetting the pain in her leg—and threatened the stranger behind her with the dagger.

She gasped. “Father!”

The man hugged her and gasped in surprise. “Oh, Lila, my darling, I can’t believe I’ve finally

found you. Ever since your sister sent you away, your mother and I have searched far and wide for you! What happened to your leg?! Hurry, come with me.”

She held on to her father’s hand and they ran deeper into the forest, until they reached a small cottage in an open area, surrounded by tall Redwoods.

Her mother was standing at the door, and crying silently. She ran to her, and they hugged for what seemed like years. When they were finished, Lila remembered to ask, “Who is Ernesto?”

“Ernesto?” her mother pondered, “We don’t know any Ernesto.”

“Yes,” her father added, “Let’s just go inside and get your leg fixed up.”

Lila knew something was wrong then. She remembered an Ernesto. Her parents had never been...liars...Then it all came back to her! Her parents were already dead! The Gypsy had killed them years ago. So then, who are these people? “Who are you?” she yelled!

“What do you mean, Lila?” her mother responded. “We are you parents. Now, show me your cut.” But Lila could not, for she was already headed for the door. Luckily it was unlocked, but when she got outside, she realized it was safer in the cottage. Not with those...whatever they were, but she had to seek refuge.

Lila sat in a hand carved rocking chair in the corner nearest the door. Her “mother” handed her a cup of green tea. Lila smelled it and determined that it was not poisonous, so she sipped it quietly while her “father” washed her wound and wrapped it up in gauze. She winced, trying not to attract attention to her pain.

“Who is Ernesto?” Lila asked again.

“Sweetheart, maybe you need some rest. There is no Ernesto,” her mother said.

Lila’s eyes narrowed. “Then why did the Gypsy send me away?” Her father and mother looked at each other, and the man finally relented.

“Alright, fine...as you know, the Gypsy is your sister. She had been dating Ernesto for a long time when she caught you and Ernesto having an affair. So, in anger, she separated you two at

opposite ends of the world. It's a miracle you ended up here, so close to Cynthiana!"

Suddenly, Lila could see Ernesto's face in her memory. Her heart swelled, and tears streamed down her face. Clenching the ruby necklace around her neck, she got up and made her way to the door. "I must find Ernesto!"

"Wait! You must rest here, at least for the night. That wound must have tired you out. Please, stay," said her mother.

"No, I can't! I can feel it, he's close. I have to go now! Every second I linger is another wasted second away from my beloved. I must go."

Suddenly, Lila caught sight of a hammer hanging on a wall of tools across the room. She ran across to the hammer and brushed her hand over the handle. On the end of the handle were the inscribed initials E.E. "Ernesto Edgerton."

She turned around to face her parents. "What have you done with Ernesto? Where is he?"

Suddenly, she heard the creak of footboards behind her. Before she could turn around to see who it was, she fell to the ground, unconscious.

CHAPTER FIVE

Something was on him. It was on his face, too. Ernesto awoke with a terrible headache and had only enough strength to swat at the fly and sit up. Everything was spinning. The large animal in front of him seemed to be a lion and a lioness at the same time.

"Oh no! That there is a lion!" he shouted. "And that's another?" He was ready to faint, but...he decided to run instead.

He was in the jungle, and it was far away from Cynthiana. But that would not become a

problem, because he wouldn't need to travel the whole distance.

When the Gypsy realized that the couple was getting closer and closer to Cynthiana, she teleported Ernesto to her well. She sent out a spy to where Lila was to make sure she kept away from Cynthiana.

CHAPTER SIX

When Lila came to, she had a splitting headache. Her hand went instinctively to her head, but she could not move her hand. It was tied up along with her other hand behind her back. She looked around and saw that she was still in the cottage with her “parents.” Someone was sitting in the rocking chair in the corner, near the door. She squinted but could not make out the face of the person sitting in shadows. Lila could hear the stranger snoring, the chair rocking slowly back and forth. She struggled to get her hands free but it was no use. The thick rope was tied around her hands quite intricately.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and she could see it was dark outside. Her “parents” came in carrying baskets, filled with fruit, vegetables, bread, and other foods.

Her “mother” smirked. “Oh. You’re awake. So sorry about the head-banging but we couldn’t possibly let you go after Roberto told you about Ernesto.” She elbowed her husband in the stomach, glaring at him. They walked into the next room, the kitchen and whispered furiously.

“I’m sorry, Stephania. I didn’t think. I forgot. You know I’m a bad liar. Please forgive me, darling,” whispered her “father,” Roberto.

“Do not call me darling, you useless oaf! From now on, you are not to say a word to Lila, or the Gypsy will have your head! Now quiet down and start the dinner,” Stephania scolded.

Roberto propped the stiff Lila up into a chair near the dinner table. Stephania came in and handed Roberto a bowl of foul smelling stew. He smiled to thank her, but Stephania returned it with a look of disgust.

Roberto tried to spoon-feed Lila, whose hands were still tied up. Lila did not like the odious green stew. With her chin, she knocked the bowl out of Roberto's hands. He looked angry, but under his breath, he muttered, "Oh, Stephania will have a fit!" He was not mad at Lila, but afraid of his wife.

Stephania came in and began to yell and curse rapidly in Italian. She went back into the kitchen, fetched a mop and hit Roberto with it before throwing it on the floor. "Clean it up!" she screamed ferociously. Roberto obediently mopped up the soaked floorboards, not saying a word.

A plan began to form in Lila's head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"LET ME GO!" yelled Ernesto. He had been chained in the dungeons of the Gypsy's well for two days now, and he was beginning to get hungry. His chains were thick and much rusted, and his cell was leaky and dark. So dark, in fact, that he could not see when the Gypsy entered. She had not brought him anything since he had gotten there, but today she entered with a bowl of water and a piece of bread.

Ernesto could not bring himself to say anything. He did not thank her, but as soon as she left he took it all and feasted greedily. He had a feeling that that would be all he got for a while.

“Where are you Lila? Why do you not come and save me from this torture? Has the Gypsy killed you? Or...Have you forgotten me Lila?!”

“So, do you mind if I call you dad?” Lila asked.

“Um, sure...” Roberto was startled by Lila’s new attitude, but he liked the attention. Lila beamed.

While Stephania went out to the nearby town to buy food and supplies, Roberto went out to the woods to gather chopped wood for the fire. “It’s getting cold up in these parts. Don’t want us to freeze to death, right?” he said, laughing. It was the first time Lila saw Roberto show any sign of happiness near home.

“Can I come, Dad? I haven’t been outside for so long; I can barely remember what sunlight on my face feels like! Please, can I?” Lila asked earnestly.

Roberto thought for a second. “No, I can’t. I’m sorry but if Stephania ever found out, she would kill me, no doubt about it!”

“Oh, I won’t tell her, I promise! She won’t be home for hours! Please, can’t I come with you? I can help you find wood.” she said.

“Oh, alright. But one word out of you about this and I’ll have your head!” he said, trying to sound stern but unsuccessful. His threat was empty and his will weak. Roberto untied Lila’s arms and hands. They had been tied so tightly that there were red rings around Lila’s pale wrists.

While they were in the woods searching for wood, Roberto climbed an old Redwood to cut off

one of its branches.

“It’s best that you stay away from that area, Lila. This Redwood branch could drop quite heavily.” Roberto shouted from up on the tree.

Lila smiled and backed away from the tree. At first, she backed up slowly but as soon as Roberto began to saw away at the branch, she ran. And she didn’t stop running until she was out of breath, which took a long time as she was rather athletic. Even if Roberto tried, he would never have caught up with her. By the time Lila stopped, she was far from the woods, at the foot of a huge mountain range. She felt a strong need to climb the mountain near her. It looked to be at least five hundred feet high, but nonetheless, Lila started to climb.

Somehow, there was always a place to hold while she climbed, as if ridges in the rocky mountains protruded along the mountain solely for Lila.

She stopped. She thought. She slapped herself on the head and kept moving up. There was no time to ponder over whether or not this was another trap. Obviously the gypsy could not have thought so far ahead. Could she have? “Oh well, I’m almost at the top anyway.”

She reached the summit and saw land in the distance. It looked like...Italy! And she felt good for remembering that that was where she had to go. Ernesto...Edgerton. Ernesto Edgerton in Italy. She looked down and saw a path. Could it really be? She started down.

About halfway down the mountain Lila got tired and decided that soon she would rest for the night. She looked and in about a quarter of a mile there was some relatively flat ground. She headed toward it. Soon she found an especially steep part of the path and decided to be careful. She got down and crawled for a bit before she noticed a small, seven-foot cliff. She went down it feet first and hung from the edge of the cliff. When she let go, one of her legs hit an uneven part of

the ground beneath and she landed her head on a sharp rock. Her cheek was bleeding, but luckily her leg was fine. She ripped a piece of cloth from the bottom of her long skirt and wrapped her cheek. The next part of the path looked to be no longer dangerous, but from then on Lila knew to always be cautious. She still did not think the Gypsy did this to her.

The sun was coming up. It would be a chilly morning. Lila searched for some breakfast and then set out down the mountain path. Eventually she came to a fork in the dirt road. The left path seemed to lead into some sort of cave, but the right path seemed to make a circle around the mountain. She was afraid she would be led back to her “parents” cabin, and the cave seemed to go straight through the next mountain, the one she would have to climb soon anyway, so she decided to take it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ernesto knew what hunger was. He could never have made that claim before, but after spending a week without food, and having to lick the water from the walls of the dank well, he knew. He also knew what longing was, for he longed for things to be the way they once were. He longed for Lila, but he secretly felt that he would rather have never met her because he now missed her so much, and he was suffering. He felt like he could probably go another week without some food, but this was not a comforting thought. He wanted to get out; he had to get out. He struggled, tried to stand, and fell back down. He was silent; he was listening for footsteps. He heard nothing. “She

must be out planning,” he said.

Ten minutes passed and he was finally up and able to walk around. He had removed his chains two days ago, but he never really had enough strength to stand until now. He could not see anything, but he tried to feel his way around. He was not in small room, but it was not circular like the walls of the well. I must be in a tunnel, he thought. He found the exit, and hoped that the Gypsy was not there. He found her room. It was very...strange. There was no way out. He couldn't find a ladder, or a rope, or a ceiling. The Gypsy could hover. She didn't need a ladder. He would have to go back to his cell and search some more.

There was another pathway. He could see a light the size of the tip of a needle, but it was there. He tried to slurp as much water as he could from the walls before he set out.

The path was long. After two hours the size of the light speck had hardly grown. He knew he had to continue though. What he did not know was that he was about half way through the cave that led to the outside, and Lila was about halfway through the cave that led to the Gypsy's well.

CHAPTER NINE

Lila could not see anything in front of her. She was beginning to really regret taking the left fork

Ernesto forced himself to keep moving. There was less water on the walls now that he was so far away from the well. He gave up, he had to rest. He found a rock and lay down so that it pointed him in the direction he had to go.

“Just ten more steps,” said Lila. On her ninth step her foot hit a rock and she fell down. She landed on something soft and was surprised to hear a groan.

Ernesto woke up with something on him. He still couldn’t see, but now he could feel that a person landed on him. His stomach sank. How did the gypsy find him?

Lila understood. She had landed on a body. It was warm...and moving. “Who are you?” she whispered. And Ernesto recognized her voice.

“Lila, is that you?”

“Ernesto?” They both had the same feeling. It was unbelievable. They had found each other at last!

The Gypsy felt something in the air. She realized what it was, and headed towards her “parents” house.

Ernesto and Lila stood and hugged for a good five minutes. All of a sudden, they felt a large tremor that came from the direction of the speck of light.

The Gypsy seemed to glide to her parents’ cottage. She kicked open the door, and looked inside. Her voice boomed, “Where is my sister?!” But there was no one to answer. The cabin was empty. She stopped and listened. A faint snoring sound came from the next room. Deeply asleep and sucking his thumb was the Gypsy’s pathetic messenger who was supposed to be keeping an eye on Lila for her.

The Gypsy writhed in anger. “You IMBECILE!” she cried. Before the thumb-sucking man could even come to, the Gypsy was already out of the door, almost flying back to the well.

Suddenly, the tiny speck of light became an overwhelming stream of sunlight. Someone had opened the cave, temporarily blinding the reunited lovers, who had grown used to the darkness of the cave before. When Lila’s and Ernesto’s eyes adjusted to the newfound light, they saw the cackling, smirking laughter of the Gypsy.

The two lovers held onto each other tightly. The Gypsy cackled at them. She held her hands up

to the sky, and lightning began and red rain began to fall. “You didn’t think I’d let you get away, did you, dear sister?” she said.

“Please! Don’t do this!” the two begged.

A look of pity swept through the Gypsy’s features, but only for a second. Then it reverted back to her icy exterior. “Why should I spare you? You betrayed me—the both of you!”

Ernesto stepped forward. “Please, spare Lila. Take me instead of her. You can have me forever if you just let Lila go. Please!”

“Oh, how sweet! You love my dear sister so much that you are willing to give up your life for her! Well, too bad. No one makes a fool out of the Gypsy and gets away with it!” With that, the Gypsy made a wave of her hand, and a lightning bolt came down toward Ernesto and Lila, who were still holding on tightly to each other. They squeezed their eyes closed and whispered to each other, “I love you.”

When Ernesto and Lila opened their eyes, they were confused. They were still in each other’s arms. They looked around, and noticed they were still outside the Gypsy’s cave.

Suddenly, Lila fell to the ground, sobbing. The Gypsy was lying limp on the ground. The red rain had stopped and the sun came out clear and bright but before doing so, the rain had soaked the Gypsy’s skin and hair. There was no sign of movement in the Gypsy. Lila took a hold of her sister’s hand and put it to her face, to the scar on her left cheek. “Oh, Gypsy...I’m so sorry.” Sitting there with her eyes closed, tears slid silently down Lila’s cheeks. Ernesto knelt down beside her with his arm around her waist.

“It’s not your fault, Lila.”

"I have to go...somewhere..." Lila said, but she didn't move. Ernesto did not know what to do. Everything he thought of saying would probably just upset Lila more. It was getting dark, and the cave was flooded up to their feet. He decided to speak anyway.

"Why are you so upset? She tried to KILL you!" Ernesto said. "You should be happy. Let me take you home. I'll carry you, come here." He moved toward Lila.

"Stay away from me! How dare you tell me how to feel! She's my sister!" Lila was now angry. She stood and came away from her sister's body. "You can leave. You can leave and never come back! I have to bury my sister." She turned her back towards him and knelt next to the Gypsy's body once more. Tears were forming under her eyes, and she didn't want Ernesto to see them. Without turning around, she told him to find a break in the wall so that they could get the Gypsy's body out of the wet and collapsed cave. When he did, he offered to carry her body, but Lila refused him. "That would be disrespectful to her, more so than we have been already."

Ernesto just did what she said. He was confused. The Gypsy was evil, and Lila knew it. When did she forget this? Well, he couldn't bring it up again any time soon. Maybe if he let her bury her they could go back to Cynthiana.

Lila did not meet Ernesto's gaze. The Gypsy's hair was burned at the edges from the lightning bolt. I wish it had hit me instead, Lila thought, or maybe that pig Ernesto. She rearranged her dress, and told Ernesto to dig a hole. She said a prayer, and filled the hole with soil herself. She had taken some herbs from the Gypsy's pouch and she planted them in the soil. Three tears fell on top of the pile, before she gave Ernest her news.

"Ernesto I have to take her place." His mouth dropped. She would not let this death go. This death was supposed to be a miracle. It's not every day that a lightning bolt hits the wrong target.

"The Gypsy killed your parents, she tried to kill you, and she tried to kill me. What place is

that exactly?”

“You know very well what place that is. I have to take her well, and I have to take her powers. My decision is made Ernesto. Her powers have already been transferred into me.” Lila turned around and looked at him. She was waiting for a response.

“Lila, I will not be with another Gypsy. You are like her already. If you take her place you will surely become her spitting image. I can see it forming in you already. If you do this, I will leave you.”

Lila looked at Ernesto for a long time. Hurt and disappointment danced across her hazel eyes. “The Gypsy does not have to be evil. My sister was only evil because we made her that way. You and I had betrayed her. You know that, Ernesto,” said Lila. Her eyebrows were knit together with perspiration.

Ernesto looked away from Lila and at his former lover, the Gypsy. A feeling of regret and sorrow swept over him. He loved the Gypsy, but when he found Lila, he could not deny his feelings. He knew what Lila said was true. He was the cause of the Gypsy’s anguish. His eyes softened. “You’re right, Lila. Let’s give the Gypsy a proper burial.”

Lila smiled through her tears. The two worked together to carry the Gypsy’s limp body, still warm from the lightening bolt, out of the well cave. They carried it to her imposter-parents’ cabin.

When Lila and Ernesto went into the cabin, it was empty. There was no sign of anyone, as if they had all disappeared. Lila took a shovel from the basement and went back outside to bury her sister. She and Ernesto decided to give the Gypsy a proper burial and wait to see whether Lila’s imposter-parents were coming back or not.

Lila closed her eyes, knees bent before her sister’s tombstone. “Dear sister. I always loved you,

through all we've been." Suddenly, Lila broke down, sobbing and then hiccupping. Through her sorrow, Lila kept repeating, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Ernesto looked on while Lila continued to cry. He stood behind a tree in the distance to give Lila privacy. The chill air seeped into Ernesto's body and he shivered. Looking up into the clouds, past the tall Redwoods, he could see the sun setting. A flock of ducks flew across the red horizon in a triangular configuration. Ernesto inhaled deeply, eyes closed. Where do we go from here? In the distance, he could still hear Lila's steady heaving sobs.

Suddenly, Lila heard something moving behind her. She figured it was not Ernesto, but when she turned around she saw him advancing with a spear. She was quick enough now that she had the gypsy powers she had always thought should have been hers. In a second he was raised off the ground and was literally being hugged by a tree.

"The Gypsies," Lila said, "were always at one with nature. They were always peaceful, at least until mankind came in and ruined their lives. They had to leave their homes, and find alternate ways of survival." She began to yell. "It was later found that the most efficient way to survive was to take the form of a human, and that is what our race did for centuries. Only on the rare occasion that one of us was discovered, would we in the surrounding area then have to go into hiding. This is the misfortune that our family was faced with. My sister killed my parents after hearing them beg for death. We ourselves became enemies when I chose to live as a human. When I took the name Lila, we lost all contact, that is, until we both met you. You, another human! We did not think it was possible for an individual of your race to almost cause our extinction. We were wrong."

Ernesto was quiet. This was too much information. Did she say extinction?

"Yes Ernesto, I did indeed say extinction. Hm...It seems that my gypsy powers are really starting to kick in..." She smiled. She walked toward him. She knew he had another knife in his belt, but she decided to let him keep it...for the moment.

“Well, my dear, what am I to do with you?” Lila asked. A mischievous look swept across her features while she walked around the tree that almost suffocated Ernesto. “I can’t simply let you go, now can I? We’ve already seen what you want to do to me so what shall I do?” she asked. It seemed as if she was talking to herself but every so often, she’d look up at Ernesto.

For a few moments, Lila continued to circle the tree. Then, she stopped in front Ernesto and stared at him with probing eyes. “Nope. Still want to kill me, don’t you?” she said. Smirking, she blew a kiss up to her old lover and whispered, “Farewell, my darling.” With that, she blinked, and Ernesto was gone.

As she walked away, back towards the cottage, her trembling lips curved downwards, and her eyes hurt from trying to hold back tears. “What have I done?” she mumbled to herself. She had just sent away the love of her life, the one she searched for and the one who, though indirectly, caused the death of her sister. But that wasn’t me. I would never do that to Ernesto. It’s these Gypsy powers, Lila thought to herself. Lila tried to find the balance between her and the Gypsy powers, but she could feel herself slipping away.

Ernesto looked at his new surroundings. He sat on the soft white sand and the waves came rushing in, cooling off his legs. No birds flew across the sky and there were no flowers or trees to be seen except for one palm tree whose leaves were wilted and brown. But, though the tree seemed dead, large coconuts hung off its weak branches. Ernesto chuckled. Lila left me on a deserted island to live off of coconuts, he thought. He remained laying on the warm sparkly sand, taking in the sun and enjoying the coolness of the water. Soon, he fell asleep, tired from all his adventures.

CHAPTER TEN

Lila was in the well. She was searching for something intently. She should have found it more quickly, because there really wasn't much in the well at all. In the eastern chamber, which she had searched through first, there was a large pile of old human skeletons, two of which were still covered with the slowly rotting skin of Lila and the Gypsy's parents. In the center chamber there were three metal chests and a bed. Each chest had three large locks on it, as well as fifty years of rust. The bed was made, since neither Lila nor the Gypsy had ever used it for anything but a place to sit and meditate. There was also a hole in the roof, which led out of the well. The western chamber, which Lila had searched after the eastern chamber, was, in a way, the largest of the rooms. It was square except for a sizeable opening in the wall opposite the entrance. On the floor there were two pairs of rusted chains, where one pair seemed to have been broken through.

Lila had to conjure light for herself, since otherwise the entire well would be pitch black. She was not about to search through the long tunnel-part of the western chamber that ran to the edge of the mountain range, so after she finished searching the rest of the room, she moved to the center chamber and started off by stripping the bed of its coverings. She even tore open the mattress and pillows, but to no avail. What she was looking for must be in one of the chests. But they are obviously sealed with magic, Lila thought to herself.

Then she recalled her powers, and broke open the first chest. She did not see what she needed, but uplifted the chest and searched through the pile of items just in case. Disappointingly, the next chest also had nothing of importance. The third chest, however, had exactly what she needed to complete her powers and seal her position. She took out the old crown and staff, and just like that, became the new Gypsy.

Lila knew what would be happening next, so she sat and waited, crown on her head, staff in

her hand, sitting on what was now one half of a bed.

She was growing increasingly impatient. The sun had gone down two hours ago, and the air grew chill. Frozen in anxious anticipation, Lila fell asleep on the bed.

Lila felt a sharp tap on her shoulder. She was having dinner with her parents in their old cabin, back in Cynthiana. She knew it was a dream, but she didn't want to wake up. Just a few more minutes, she thought. But then another sharp tap hit her on the shoulder again. She opened her eyes to see the Gypsy standing in front of her. But, it wasn't the Gypsy. It was Lila's little sister, a ten-year old dark-haired, doe-eyed girl in ribbon-tied pigtails.

"Lila! Wake up! It's time," the little girl whispered loudly. She tugged on Lila's shawl and ran out of the cave into the forest. Every once in a while, she would look back to make sure Lila was following her.

It seemed like hours when, finally, Lila and the little girl arrived at an opening in the woods. Lila looked around at the open space, trying to remember if this was here when she had walked to the well earlier that day. The tall trees had withering leaves that drifted to the ground easily with the wind. Their trunks were thin and long, and the trees were so close together that Lila couldn't see which direction she came from.

"Where am I, Julia?" she asked her sister.

The little girl pointed to the lake in the middle. "She's waiting for you," she said. She took Lila's hand and led her to the crystal-blue lake. The water rippled as the wind raced through the air. Lila looked into the water, but all she could see was her reflection. Looking at herself, she was surprised and ashamed to see how much her face had changed. Wrinkles crinkled up her diamond-shaped face, and there was weariness in her eyes.

"What am I supposed to do? Where is she?" Lila asked.

Lila's sister, an innocent little girl that stood before her with no magical powers but those in her mystifying blue eyes, gazed at her in a brief moment of wonder.

“Jump in, Lila. She’s waiting,” said Julia. She smiled to tell Lila that she needn’t worry. Something in the girl’s eyes told Lila that it was okay to jump into the lake, that she had to jump in.

Without looking back, Lila dove into the icy-cold water.

Julia dived in after her.

Lila was floating under the water, searching her surroundings. The water was the clearest blue, and she could see for a mile down. There was an entirely new world down near the bottom of the lake, with colorful fish swimming every which way and rocks glimmering under the distant sun. Lila was sure that if she tried, she could find gold buried underneath the sandy bottom. But just as she thought to swim deeper down, she saw a whirl of rapid movement in the corner of her eye.

She had been unaware that Julia had jumped after her, and she knew that Julia could not swim. It seemed like a strong invisible hand had gotten a hold of her leg and was tugging with more force than she had resistance. Lila swam after her, but could not catch her. As she swam she caught a glimpse of the panic in Julia’s eyes, and it drove her to move more quickly.

It seemed to Lila that Julia would not wake up, but she sat next to her and tried to get her back. Her heart was pounding, and her hands were shaking. She began to cry, and her tears fell in Julia’s already wet hair.

Julia finally stirred.

The little girl got up, and she slowly backed away from Lila.

“You have to go in by yourself, Lila...” she whispered. As Julia slowly backed into the shadows, she waved to her sister and smiled reassuringly.

Well, there's no point in delaying, Lila thought. She inhaled sharply and dove in head first with her eyes closed.

When Lila finally opened her eyes, she found herself in a dimly lit cave surrounded by rushing waterfalls. She looked around and saw nobody. Suddenly, a voice boomed overhead.

"Hello, dear sister," said the voice.

"Julia?"

"Yes, dear, it is I. Now, I don't have much time. I've overstayed my welcome in Purgatory already so I'll be frank: now that I'm dead, you've become the new Gypsy. You mustn't abuse your powers. Only use them for good. And...go back to Ernesto. He loves you, and I know you still love him as well. Go back to Cynthiana, and live peacefully with your new child."

Lila gasped, and her hand went instinctively to her stomach. "How do you know?" she asked.

"Good-bye, Lila."

The voice faded away, and the waterfalls around Lila stopped. Suddenly, Lila was outside, in the woods, again. As she stood there trying to sort everything out, she caught sight of Ernesto in the distance. Ernesto spotted her, and grinned. He ran towards her, and they grasped each other in a long embrace.

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's go home," Ernesto said.

ADRENALINE

Natasha Mishchenko and Aglika Darakchieva

Passages written in italics were contributed by Natasha Mishchenko.

All other passages were written by Aglika Darakchieva.

She had never seen something so...brilliant. This was the smartest criminal she had ever encountered. Who would leave something like “Good to meet you,” written on the wall.... And to top it all off, he had killed the man in the cellar, with the rope. Would her lack of experience at that popular board game present a problem later in the case?

Her name was Mrs. Maple, and she had been a detective for twenty-nine years. The title of missus still haunted her to this day, more than the occasional dead body that came from her memory into her dreams. Maybe, she thought, maybe this case would be the one.

Mrs. Maple was considered one of the best detectives on the force. She had encountered many cases similar to this, but this was just so exciting, yet disturbing. The sentence on the wall was in dark, dry blood as it was dripping while the killer wrote it. The blood was neither from the killer, nor the victim, well at least not this one. This man was the newest serial killer in New York. He had used his previous victim's blood to write such greetings. They scared her, but she kept her cool.

Adrenaline. That was the word for what she felt, and she hoped desperately that that feeling would not leave. And that thought led her back to her husband. Oh how she had loved him! She did not think she could feel more ashamed of what she had done to him... But it was for his own good! He had no right trying to do what he did! And she was glad his murderer was never found. She knew what her job was. It was to create a sense of completion. A family always wanted to hear that a missing person was located, especially after long absences. The thoughts of what could have happened were torture, and every family she had ever spoken to had always preferred to know that a loved one was dead, rather than missing.

She had to get back to work now. She had to show everyone that though she was getting older, she was still as good a detective as she ever was. Her first task was to explore the house and surrounding areas, and what she found...let us just say the adrenaline feeling only grew.

She got through the spotless house. There were no clues whatsoever. Mrs. Maple finally got to the body. It was probably a week old, and decaying, slowly. The cold weather prevented most of the damage. Mrs. Maple was just another detective to be put on this case. There were three detectives before her, and they all died, murdered. She was one of the future victims. No, that could never happen, I'm too paranoid to let that happen, she thought to herself. But still there was an uneasy feeling flowing around her. What if she gets murdered, what if the killer is after her, what if...

What if she captures this guy? She had never received one of his cases before. Maybe she would be the one to put him behind bars, and then that good feeling would be back. She had known it before...She could not let her mind slip away anymore. She had to get back to her case. Just as she had thought, she soon became very interested in it indeed.

Forensics was done. It was clean and simple. A hanging. This man was a classical character.

For a second she felt that she wanted to keep him loose, just to see what he would think of next. But then she snapped back and went to collect the blood test results.

“Well, this is very interesting and unusual. We’ve found blood from three different people! This’ll be a tough one, Angie.”

“I can handle it Mark. Thanks. So, how’s the wife?”

“She’s fine. She still wants to meet you, more than ever in fact.”

“Well, we’ll have to arrange that. Goodbye.”

But Mark was right. Mrs. Maple even speculated that he was more correct than even he knew. Had the murderer cut himself? After a visit to the forensics lab, it was concluded that the man who was murdered, a rich businessman from the Upper East side, had not been cut. And from her work in his house, she had sensed that there were at most only two people who had entered that house in the last few months. “I hate it when Mark is right,” she sighed.

Mrs. Maple headed for home after she visited the lab. It was raining outside, horribly, and she didn’t have an umbrella. She quickly stopped a cab and gave her home address. As the cab pulled over she paid the driver and exited the cab. She entered her building, passing the doorman as she was heading for the elevator. She turned around and walked towards him.

“You keep records of who goes upstairs, right? I mean, any people who don’t live here and only visit, they’re signed in a book right?” The doorman nodded as Mrs. Maple smiled. “Thanks,” she said as she headed for the elevator. She got in and pressed her button. On the second floor a man entered the elevator.

“Good to meet you,” he softly whispered next to her ear while smiling evilly. Mrs. Maple jumped. The man was dressed all in black, and the shadow of his hat covered his face.

“You...” She was just about to say something when the man exited the elevator on the third floor. It was him... it was the killer.

Would she tell anyone that she saw him? How could she prove anything anyway? His face was concealed, and he left before they could talk. She even noticed that when he walked in he did not lean against the wall or touch anything but the button for the third floor, and he was wearing gloves.

When she got into the apartment, it surprised her that everything was normal. If the criminal could find her apartment building, he could surely find her apartment. Mrs. Maple scowled. She was always letting crazy thoughts into her head. She never admitted it to anyone, but it was those thoughts that usually led her to solve her cases. But this one, this one was absurd. There were no bombs or traps in her closet. There was nothing in the kitchen sink or refrigerator. Just to make sure, she checked her whole house anyway.

She did not think to inspect her phone.

Well it was too late to ponder on it now, so Mrs. Maple went to bed with her gun under her pillow. She had a right to be paranoid; she could barely sleep. This case was just killing her. She finally fell asleep at two in the morning. She soon heard her alarm go off at its usual time, 6:00 A.M. She lazed around more than usual as she jumped out of bed by 6:05 and took a short, hot shower. She was dressing when she got a phone call. Her hands shook as she picked up the receiver “H-h-hello?” She heard a familiar voice on the other line.

“Hey, come quickly, I think I found something. How are you today anyway? I’ve never heard you stutter.” Mrs. Maple softly, but angrily responded.

“Mark, you scared the hell out of me...I’m coming, and about my condition, well...I’ll get over it.”

Mrs. Maple soon found herself in the elevator of her work building. It scared her, but as she got to her floor the feeling was gone. She got to Mark. “What, did you find anything?” She was so

excited... Mrs. Maple felt so happy. Finally, something on the killer.

Just as quickly as her excitement had come, it disappeared. This was not about the killer!

So what you're saying is, the man has been divorced, and one of his wives is under investigation. That's...that might go somewhere. You, keep working on that."

She could not tell him the killer was male! Then she would have to do some further explaining, and this was just not an option right now. Her excitement had turned into despair. She was alone on this case. Not that she hadn't always worked alone, but she had always conversed with Mark, to see what he thought. He was really more intelligent than he believed. Now, some strange woman was under investigation. It was ridiculous. The handwriting on the wall was clearly male! Mrs. Maple was sure they would find some evidence against the lady. That is how it worked. These cases took time...

Why had she not called in for handwriting analysis before? She figured that it simply did not occur to her that a message written in blood on a wall should be tested for handwriting. "The people at the office will think this is absurd." But she now knew that it should have been the most obvious thing to do.

Mrs. Maple slowly walked into the dull, white interrogation room. A woman was sitting at the table intently following the detective with her eyes..."So what's your name?" The woman looked at Mrs. Maple.

"Shirley Carlson." Mrs. Maple looked at her.

"Would you please write the Pledge of Allegiance for me? If you don't mind, we would like to do a handwriting analysis." Shirley nodded as Mrs. Maple handed her a sheet of loose leaf and a pencil. Shirley started writing as the detective exited the room. She met up with Mark.

"Mark, I want you to keep an eye on her. Do the handwriting analysis, I need to do something." Mark tried to stop her but she was already half-way down the hall. She got in the elevator as Mark followed her.

“Where are you going?” Mrs. Maple pressed the lobby button.

“To the crime scene.”

She remembered thinking that Mark was smart. As true as that still was, he was also very stubborn and somewhat ignorant at times. She had her camera, and she took multiple pictures of the murderer’s bloody message. She gave it to the same people who would analyze Shirley Carlson’s handwriting. It was her attempt to prove that she was innocent, and that in fact the murderer was male. She didn’t know she would be revealing more than she expected.

Mrs. Maple’s predictions were correct. “The handwriting is indeed male,” Mark claimed as Mrs. Maple smiled.

“And it didn’t match.”

“No.”

“Ha! I...”

“Yes, you told me so.”

Mrs. Maple looked at Mark.

“I need to go back to the crime scene. I know that there’s something more there...”

“Wait,” Mark said. “I can’t do this.” Mrs. Maple was confused. “I think we made a mistake. Right after we officially proved Shirley to be innocent, he struck again.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. There was a pause. “Mark, what happened?”

“He killed her. I guess he was hoping she would be convicted. Even I was hoping that.”

This was not like him, she thought. Then she took it back. Who was she to think that she knew a murderer?

“Do not make friends with murderers.” Mark looked at her. “Just some general advice,” she quickly added.

She went over the entire house again. Or at least, that was her plan, and she wanted to stick with her plan. “Don’t act like much is different.” Luckily she had started in the attic. The cellar was

the last place she looked, and as she expected, there was a new message written there.

“That’s what you get. I thought you were my friend.”

“Okay, totally out of place here...” Mrs. Maple was wondering what the killer meant. Why, why did he think that she was his friend? She ran down to the lobby and headed for the doorman. Mrs. Maple showed her badge and asked to see the visitors list for the last month. She took it for handwriting analysis. “Thanks. I need this for a case, I will bring it back. You won’t get in trouble.”

“Not even one of the names matches the handwriting on the wall!” Mrs. Maple cried. “Damn it Mark, I was so close.” Mark nodded. “Listen, I’m going to Shirley’s place. I want to see if there’s anything I could find there. You check out the events that happened during the last few weeks. Any weird events, any irregularities. I think there’s something that doorman didn’t tell me.” Mrs. Maple and Mark separated ways. Mrs. Maple arrived at Shirley’s. The small apartment was neat, but she could feel someone roaming around the empty rooms.

“Hello? ...Is someone there?” All of a sudden, there was a loud bang. It was followed by heavy footsteps, and before Mrs. Maple knew it, the murderer got behind her and....

“I thought you were my friend,” said the man, and Mrs. Maple heard him right before she passed out.

“Well, Mrs. Maple, you’re lucky to have your memory, and you can check out tomorrow!” She just looked at him. Why was there a doctor in front of her? “What happened?” As she finished her question a nurse came in and asked the doctor to come with him right away. Mrs.

Maple just sat there, trying to collect her thoughts. Shirley was dead, she remembered. And she had been searching her house when the murderer had hit her. She thought the doctor was wrong. She was lucky just to be alive. This was not her first time treating a murder case as a game, but it was the first time that so many things had gone wrong.

Mrs. Maple stayed in the hospital, alone. No one went to visit her. Mark never came. She waited and waited. But why did she care so much about him? Why? Because she was attracted to him. He was the only person who actually really talked to her. But why? He was married, he didn't really have feelings for her. He was only a good friend. Mrs. Maple shook off the thought as she got up from her bed. She paced around the room just so that she can get her stiff body to wake up. "I'm getting old."

"No, you're not." a strange, yet familiar voice crept up behind her. "You are the perfect age..." Mrs. Maple turned around, expecting everything, expecting the worst.

"Mark! Gosh, you scared me!"

"Yeah, sorry about that. I came just to tell you, there was another victim. By the way, I wasn't lying. You're not old." Mrs. Maple chuckled. There was something in Mark's voice that made her feel uneasy.

"Who was the victim?"

"I don't think that it is anyone really relevant to your case now. It sort of is important to the rest of the police force though. The murderer has killed the man's other wife."

"Are you kidding me? We could have questioned her. And so you know, Mark, any death is important to me!" This was unlike him. "What is with you?" He didn't realize. He seemed very preoccupied, and Mrs. Maple rethought her question. "Is everything okay, Mark" He looked at her, and it seemed as if he was about to explain something terrible. Tears came to his eyes, and he looked at the ground. All of a sudden, [Aglika:] Mark grabbed Mrs. Maple's arm tightly as the door burst open.

“I know who the killer is,” he whispered in her ear. Maple jerked and her face showed surprise.

“What?”

The doctor headed for Mrs. Maple. “I need to conduct a few tests, is that okay, Mrs. Maple?” She nodded as Mark headed for the door.

“Mark, who is it?” He turned to her as he exited the door.

Mrs. Maple finally got out of the hospital, anxious to talk to Mark...

She could not find him however. She hoped that he had not gone searching for the murderer, but she hoped more that the murderer had not found him. It would have to wait, though, because she had more to do.

After talking to the families of the three that had been murdered so far, and some friends and neighbors as well, Mrs. Maple decided that the murderer had nothing to do with any of these people, and they had nothing to do with him. The messages he left in their blood also had nothing to do with them. In fact, they were definitely written to the person who would find the bodies. Mrs. Maple realized, “It’s a trap!” He was after her! But, what had she done?

Mrs. Maple went to the most recent site with Mark. He was acting so weird lately. “Mark, are you okay?” Mark was preoccupied and was lost in his thoughts... “Mark?”

As Mrs. Maple finished checking the small apartment, she finally found a finger print. “Mark! I found something!” Mark didn’t move as he looked at her. “Mark! Mark!”

Then Mrs. Maple woke up. "It was a dream..." she said. She decided to investigate the site from her dream. It had been...from another murder! Was there another murder? In the dream she was...in Mark's house!

She was there fifteen minutes later. All of the lights were off, even though it was about time that there should be movement inside. She knocked on the front door. She was breathing hard, and she could see her breath in front of her. No one was answering, so she took a key from under a flowerpot near the outside left window.

She slammed the door open, and quickly lost her confidence and adrenaline. There was something about the inside of the house that was chilling. In the kitchen breakfast was set, but it had not been touched. The pancakes were cold and the cereal was soggy. In the den, a lamp was broken, and no one had picked it up. This was too much.

She heard a noise from the upstairs hallway, and she decided to quietly go investigate. The third step up the stairs always creaked, she remembered, so she skipped it. She was not too old for this. When she saw Mark, she ran to him, and the adrenaline was back. He looked very scared.

His eyes appeared to be telling her to stop, but she kept going. Before she knew it, she heard a noise behind her and felt the tip of a gun against the back of her head. The murderer said "Welcome back. I knew you were my friend."

"Let her go!" yelled Mark. He was weeping. He looked down to his left, and Mrs. Maple followed his gaze. She saw, but she could not believe it. There was a fourth body, just like in her dream. She looked at Mark because she could not make out a face. From his eyes she knew. It was his wife.

"How could you?" she yelled. The murderer just smiled.

"I hope you will be my friend. Not the man though. He won't be our friend. I already asked him." He smiled again.

"I am Mrs. Maple's friend." He looked at her. Then he turned back to the murderer. "You better

leave her alone. I don't even care what you do to me!"

"Mark!" yelled Mrs. Maple. She didn't deserve those words from him, and she told him so then and there. It did not make the murderer happy. He suddenly bent down and began to cry. His gun was still in his hand, and it was still pointed at Mark. When no one moved or said anything, he looked up.

"You're right. She's not my friend. Maybe..." He smiled to himself. "Maybe. I still have one more chance." He smiled. In a second he was rushing at Mark, not with a gun, but with a knife. His gun was on the ground. He knew it was better to use a knife, and the blood from a knife was easier to write with. Mark tried to back away but tripped. The murderer stopped running and stood over him. He pointed his knife, but heard a creak and turned.

The next thing Mark felt was the murderer's bloody body falling on him. The falling knife had missed him only by an inch. He got out from under the body and looked at Mrs. Maple, who had a gun in her hand.

"Adrenaline," she said. "Mysterious thing."

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