

The Three Impossible Tasks of Anastasia Morozova  
(excerpt)

My name is Anastasia Morozova. I work for a witch, and it's no one's fault but my own.

Three nights a month, when the moon is at its fullest, I leave behind the world of science and logic, and enter one of magic and an entirely different set of rules. I slip out of our apartment—so often empty thanks to my parents' conflicting work schedules--, and wind my way through the city, going from quiet residential neighborhood to busy artsy section until I reach the Gaslight District, the strange dark heart of Puxhill where nothing is entirely as it seems. From there, it's just a couple of turns down increasingly smaller streets until you stumble upon the sprawling lot which hosts the Midnight Market, where anything can be bought or sold if you're brave, foolish, or desperate enough.

I work at a small stall which sells all manner of potions, oils, lotions, tonics, and bottled essences; after a year and a half of this, I've learned a terrifying amount about our wares, all under the stern tutelage of the ancient woman I call Grandmother, though we're in no way related. She starts every night the same way. "Mind yourself, child, and control those wicked thieving fingers of yours. Take what isn't yours, and our bargain is forfeit." After reminding me of this, she cackles, and wanders off for hours on end, to pursue errands I've never been brave enough to ask about.

Tonight, however, is just a little different. "Mind yourself, child," she says, "and control those wicked thieving fingers of yours. Take what isn't yours, and our bargain is forfeit. And that

would be such a terrible shame, when you're so close to being free of your obligations to me.” She taps the tips of her long fingers together, and grins at me with that sharp smile while something cold flickers in those black eyes of hers. Grandmother is nothing if not a collection of unsettling extremes, like a shadow cast by a flickering fire.

How could I forget? Tonight marks the forty-ninth night I've worked for her over the past eighteen months. One final night of service to complete the “seven times seven” she first demanded of me, and I'll be released from our deal.

Our deal. Like I entered it willingly. All I'd meant to do was steal something shiny and glittering to impress a girl, and one of Grandmother's crystal jars seemed perfect for my needs. I didn't even know what I was taking at the time. (Later, I discovered it was a skin cream which would enhance your beauty, but only at the cost of making dogs hate you. Grandmother's wares are often double-edged like that.)

I got caught.

I didn't get the girl.

Instead, I got a job.

In return for not claiming my “wicked thieving fingers” for her very own, Grandmother offered me a deal: work off my debt to her. If I served her well and obeyed her rules, not only would she forgive my trespasses, she'd grant me a favor

Steal from her again, however and all bets were off.

I'd spent endless hours thinking about what to ask for—and how to phrase it so that even Grandmother couldn't twist it into something horrible. Trying to outthink her can be exhausting. What could I ask of her to make this all worthwhile? Enough money so my parents could stop

working so hard and pay attention to me again? Beauty or charm to attract the boy or girl of my dreams? I'd learned to distrust such magical short-cuts. But I enjoyed the fantasy nonetheless.

I smile and dip my head politely. "Of course, Grandmother. As much as I have enjoyed my time with you, I'll be glad when all is said and done, and we can go our separate ways again." Her way of speaking is infectious; I've become so much more careful with my words around her. You never know when a question might be interpreted as a request, an offer might be construed as a bargain, and a promise held as a binding agreement.

"Impertinent child," she sniffs in that way of hers that I've learned means she's amused. "Of all my assistants over the years, you've been one of the least unsatisfactory. Why, I'm almost tempted to learn your name." With that, she flicks her hand at me. "Get to work, girl. If business is slow, you may make yourself useful by restocking. We've run low on memory charms and silver tongue potions. Election season must be coming up." She cackles, and wanders off, singing an old, old lullaby in Russian.

*"Tili, Tili Born*

*Close your eyes quickly*

*Someone's walking by the window*

*And knocking at the door..."*

There are times when I wish I hadn't learned Russian from my father's parents, my dedushka and babushka. Grandmother makes an already disturbing song even more unsettling in the way she imbues everything with an air of menace. I watch until she's turned a corner, and then exhale, relieved to be on my own for a while.

Not that I'm alone for long. Her stall is popular, and business is steady. There's always someone wanting drops to change the color of their eyes, soap which erases the signs of age,

potions to make them luckier. Several students from Tuesday University buy memory charms which will help them study for exams. I warn them that they'll forget everything they've learned under the influence when it wears off, and they dismiss me with a laugh. They don't care; so long as they pass their classes, they're happy. They'll worry about the future when it comes. Fools.

    Magic offers short-cuts and easy solutions but be damned sure it's worth the cost.

    Even with customers to distract me, the hours pass with agonizing slowness. That's one of the Gaslight District's crueller tricks: it might behave itself in the daytime, but at night, things grow weird and wild and unruly; morning only comes when the dark has grown tired or bored. Outside, where the modern, rational world holds sway, time passes at normal, but in here, the span from sunset to sunrise can feel like hours or even days.

    Perhaps it's just my anticipation that stretches tonight into an eternity. I'm so close to being done with this... but then what? I'm not sure I know how to return to a life without magic and wonder, or the lingering hint of capricious doom presented by Grandmother. Dare I admit that this is even... fun, sometimes? That I enjoy having this thing which is mine, that my parents don't know about, that my classmates can't share in? Real life feels so dry after a night in the Market.

    Regardless, there's a dull period where I lean against the counter and stare out at the other stalls and booths which make up the Midnight Market. I don't know where it came from or where it goes when it's not in Puxhill on the nights of the full moon. Moscow? Over the rainbow? Faerie? I asked Grandmother once, and she asked me in return what I'd pay for the answer. I declined that bargain. She laughed and told me to sweep her workspace.

Lately, there's one particular stall which catches my attention. Directly across from me is a cobbler who sells glass slippers, iron shoes, seven-league boots, red dancing shoes, and the like. A few months ago, he took on a new apprentice, a girl my own age with long raven-dark hair, cheerful eyes, and a smile that can drive me to distraction. We've never spoken, so I don't know her name or where she comes from or why she's here or if she would even like me. Once I'm free of the bargain, I'd like to find out all these things.

She looks my way just as I'm looking in hers; our gazes lock unexpectedly. She gives me one of those distracting smiles and lifts her hand in a wave. Caught off-guard like a fool, I hesitate, then wave back awkwardly. My hand bumps against a wooden rack of vials. It teeters, threatens to fall. With a yelp, I move to steady it before it can topple.

I catch all but one of the vials. But that last bounces and rolls off the counter, tumbles towards the floor where it shatters. Golden droplets fly, and I wince at the sound of destruction. Grandmother won't be happy, but even she understands accidents happen. I just need to clean it up and restock from the supplies in her workspace. I think I can afford to pay if she insists. Still, such a stupid mistake.

As I clean up the mess, a golden droplet catches to my finger, and I stop to admire its strange, viscous beauty. There's something hypnotic about it, something compelling...

What happens next, however, is as unconscious as it is unthinkable: Before I'm even aware of my body's movements, as though obeying a craving not my own, I lick my finger clean, sucking the droplet between my lips. My tongue tingles, fire dances through my blood, and the world itself seems to take on a new, crisper quality. I realize what I've done, but too late.

No.

No no no.

Oh dear sweet God no.

I scramble for the pieces of the vial, for the label. “Essence of Sight.”

My familiarity with our wares has my mind automatically reciting ingredients, effects, drawbacks. This one grants visions of things which are hidden, unseen, or unknown. It offers new insights... but those who drink it will never be able to shut their eyes to the magical world again. A blessing and a curse, an indelible mark upon the soul.

I stare down at my “wicked, thieving fingers” with a bone-deep horror. With my new sight, I can see how they betray me with a newfound glow. I look around at the stalls and merchants of the Midnight Market, and I see familiar people wrapped in unfamiliar shadows, rainbow auras, glittering lines of magic racing here and there. I shut my eyes to try and dismiss these new sights, but colors dance behind my eyelids nonetheless.

It doesn't matter what happened or why, or that I didn't mean it. It doesn't matter that it was an accident, or that I made it forty-eight and a half nights.

I know how Grandmother interprets bargains and rules.

I have broken our pact. I have stolen from her.

And when she comes whirling in out of nowhere, riding in a giant mortar, steering it with a monstrous pestle, I am entirely unsurprised.

I fall to my knees before she's even come to a halt, ready to beg forgiveness, ready to offer whatever it takes to stave off her wrath. Perhaps she'll allow me to extend my service.

Perhaps...

I look down at the ground, rather than try to meet those cold eyes, to see the sharp teeth, to watch the long fingernails click and clack as she decides my fate. Tears escape from squeezed-

shut eyes. My greatest regret is that my family will never know what happened to me. I'll have vanished one night, never to be seen again. Just another blurb on the news.

I wait for the anger. The storm. The pain.

A single jagged fingernail catches me below the chin, forcing me to look up. She's a cruel one, Grandmother, forcing me to be witness to my own fate. Fine. I steel myself. I offer up my hands.

She shakes her head. "It's too late for that, child. I should take your wicked, thieving fingers, and tear out your traitorous tongue, and pluck out your new shimmering eyes." A sound escapes me, half-sob, half-whimper. "I should," she says. "They would make lovely delicacies. I would arrange them on a platter and enjoy them with a fine cup of wine brewed from your blood and tears. I would wear your fingerbones as a necklace and think of you quite fondly every time they clattered. Perhaps I'd even remember your name."

I try to look away from the night sky in her eyes, but her grip on my chin is suddenly made of iron. She seems to be reading me. I try to speak, but she shushes me. "Don't interrupt, child. It's impolite. As I've said, you have been one of the least unsatisfactory assistants I've ever had. Why, I was going to offer you an apprenticeship if you survived long enough." She lets out a deep, deep sigh, like the autumn wind. "But a deal is a deal, and you broke the rules. What am I to do with you?"

Again, I try to move, to speak, but she won't let me. Her grip becomes painful, choking off my attempts to plead or bargain or *anything*. She leans in so close that her nose practically pokes mine, and I all but choke from something rotten in her breath. "Call me soft-hearted and sentimental," she says at last, "but I don't particularly wish to kill you right now. No, that would be a waste of such a promising girl." She shakes her head and releases me, shoving me

backwards so I sprawl onto the ground. She jabs a finger at me. “I will set before you three impossible tasks, child. Complete them all and find your way back to me before time runs out, and I shall consider all debts paid, all bargains fulfilled. Why, I will even reward you as originally promised. Fail even one and...”

We both know what is left unspoken. At dawn, the Market moves on to its next stop, chasing the moon. If I’m not back by then, Grandmother will be gone, and I’ll fail even if I succeed in my tasks.

“Do you agree to this, girl?”

I nod, quickly. Any chance seems better than the alternative.

“Then perhaps I shall see you again.” Grandmother snaps a finger, and suddenly I am enveloped in a freezing wind. It tears at my clothes, tears at my hair, tears at my senses, and I am tossed away all in a jumble. Grandmother and the Midnight Market and the cobbler’s apprentice with the raven hair and distracting smile all vanish in a heartbeat.

When everything settles, I’m alone. The twisting, narrow streets, and flickering lamps on the street corners suggest I’m somewhere deep in the Gaslight District, far from familiar territory, far from safety and friendly faces. Here, closed shops have signs in languages I can’t read, and the outside world with its modern technology and rational behavior is a distant memory.

With Grandmother’s challenge still ringing in my ears, I look around, wondering just how to find my way home from here. The streets all possess a certain sameness in their winding, cobblestoned manner, and the signs at their corners twist in a dreamlike illegibility. I’ll find no clues here. My phone is no help whatsoever; its icons spin uselessly, unable to find service or GPS, maps or connection. Of course, that would have been too easy.



The Gaslight District possesses a capricious contempt for things of science and logic.

I force myself to slow my thoughts and still my breathing. Grandmother said I would undergo impossible tasks... but if I can complete them, I'll go free. That means that, however slim, I still have hope. There is a way out of this, somehow. And as I calm myself, allowing the scents and sounds of my surroundings to wash over me, I feel something in the air. A chill wind, bearing the ever-so-slight hint of apples and cinnamon and nutmeg. It's better than nothing. I gather my courage around me like a coat and follow the wind down one street. Shadows dance around me as the gas lamps flicker, granting me a bizarre sort of entourage.

Time passes, but the full moon overhead doesn't budge, frozen in place by a night that refuses to end. I follow the wind and its tempting scents around one corner and another. Ancient brick buildings loom to either side, dark windows watching me, closed doors maintaining their silence, and I wonder who or what lives and works back here, so removed from the real world.

I am a stranger, lost and far from home. In another time, another place, this would be the deep, dark woods. Does something lurk in the shadows, ready to devour me if I lose my way? Every new sound, every echoing footstep conjures thoughts of wolves and worse. I pick up my pace.

When I turn another corner and come face-to-face with a small house whose windows blaze with welcoming light, I almost weep with relief. It smells of apples and cinnamon and nutmeg. It's warm and I am so cold. It can't hurt to see if the owner will let me rest, if just for a minute. Perhaps they can give me directions.

I go to knock on the front door, and it swings open at my touch. "Do come in," calls a voice. "I'd get up to greet you myself, but I'm no longer as spry as I once was." I weigh my options and decide to take my chances. I step into the room.

It's indeed warm and cozy, with a fire roaring in the hearth and pleasant smells wrapping all around me. The owner of the voice is an old woman, settled into a comfortable chair by the window. Unlike Grandmother, who is made of extremes and sharp in all the wrong places, this woman is soft and round, red-cheeked and smiling. She has knitting in her lap, and the needles in her hands flash and click hypnotically. "Hello, child," she says. "You are far from home and on a dark path. Is it of your own free will, or by compulsion?"

"Some of one, much more of the other," I reply, unable to tear my eyes from the speed at which she knits. I can't quite make out what she's creating; it either has too many holes, or not enough. I have no idea what to make of her golden aura, which fades when I try to focus on it. My new sight does not work when I try too hard. This is good to know.

"A wise answer. Will you share tea with me, child?" She gestures to a small table on which a platter sits with two wooden cups and a steaming pot.

Though this old woman is not Grandmother, my instincts still scream at me to be polite, to accept her hospitality. I pour us each a cup, and she pauses her work to take hers. At a nod from her, I gingerly settle into the armchair opposite her. Next to the fire on the floor, a sleepy white cat stretches and yawns at me before dismissing me again.

"So tell me child, what puts you on the dark road?" she asks, after the tea, which tastes of apples and cinnamon and nutmeg, has done its duty and warmed my insides.

I smile ruefully. "A terrible mistake, I fear, but one I hope to rectify."

She nods, all too knowingly. "Of course. Very few ever set foot on the dark road of their own accord. Well, take heart, child. Though you have far to go, you may yet find the end."

"Can you tell me which way to go?" I ask, unable to hold back the question.

"I can, child, and I will, if you do me one small favor."

I'm all set to agree, to say of course I'll help, I'll do anything, but all those long hours with Grandmother come back to hold my tongue and curb my enthusiasm. Instead, I say, "I can do my best, but make no promises."

The old woman laughs kindly and puts down her tea cup. "Well-spoken. If you would, child, untangle this knitting for me. Bright Dawn here got into it and made quite the mess, and my fingers aren't what they once were." She indicates the cat, and a basket of thread next to her.

The cat again yawns at me, and flicks its tail, slinking off towards another room. I look to the old woman and remember the way her fingers fairly flew just a moment ago and doubt that she's as infirm as she claims. But this sounds like a reasonable task. "Of course," I tell her.

But after I have gently settled myself down on the floor with the basket of thread, I discover that it truly is a tangled mess, with no end and no beginning and a thousand knots, each more devilish than the last. I carefully pick and pull and tease them apart, only to find two more have sprung up in their place. Tears of frustration threaten to escape my eyes, and I'm sure my fingers must be bleeding from the effort. It's hopeless.