

NINKI GOES TO THE ARCANE ACADEMY

by Greg Stolze

I'll never forget the first spell I cast. Wizards don't, by and large. Spells you don't even recognize as magic, like my first—you know it's *something*, even if you mistake it for religion, or falling in love, or being consumed by hatred and sorrow.

A laundry paddle got my first spell.

I'd turned thirteen years, so the city was no longer obligated to teach me sums and letters. I had never excelled at such studies, or else the schools in dockface weren't good at teaching. Days emptied of learning, I needed a job.

Delorge, my best friend and something of the captain of our street, tried to get me a job at the Happy House, but my mother wouldn't have it. Mother was a laundress, and my father a stevedore, and I was the third of six children. We were all raised to work hard and behave properly, despite Delorge's best efforts.

Mother and father were always so very practical, with just little bits of joy or selfishness dabbed onto the corners of their lives. They did as they must, took the jobs they had to take, while Delorge was always trying to make the world do as she bid it—and failing hard more often than not, but she seemed so much more herself. My parents never even asked why, but my friend, she asked “why not?” every day.

I think I owe her a great debt, for teaching me how to ask that. She put the idea in my head that I could be the one who decides, who makes things happen, instead of just being the one they happen to.

Delorge survived when the city burned. Brack, one of my brothers, he made it to the fleet as she did. I like to think some of my family got out to the north or the west, but so far magic has failed me. It's not good at traveling, or at least, I'm not good at enchanting things to move and seek.

I tried being a cook's mate on a fishing boat, at first, that thirteenth year. The *Sunbird* was not one of the two-masters that sets out for months at a time, but a little local swell-rider. It sailed out for three days in season when the brickells were running on the current, and otherwise made day trips to net eels and shallow-hags and the occasional smallshark. I was hired for that brickell run, when the sailors barely sleep, just work work work, and pause only to bolt food and a dash of rum-in-coffee before baiting more hooks and throwing more cages. Brickells are fine food and keep well, so three days of catching them can earn almost as much money as such a boat gains in the rest of the spring season. But they only came close and shallow for three days of spawning a year.

The work was awful. The boat had one room for cooking and rest. People were in and out of it at all hours to crash down for a brief and fitful nap before more work work work. Cooks got no cut of the proceeds, so we were not expected to toil so unceasingly, but it was still difficult and constant, foul-smelling and hot, and I did not care for it. I was always at others' bidding, and they didn't even bother to learn my name.

The *Sunbird* did me three good things. It convinced me I was not fit as a ship's cook, since the waves dizzied and sickened me even in relative tranquility after the storm season. It put some coin in my purse, which became food for my siblings and parents and me.

It also gave me my first sight of Borzhu, my city, from the sea.

We set out before dawn on a dark tide. I was so afraid of the water, the sailors, and of failing my job, that I barely bothered looking back. What was the point? I saw the mountain silhouetted against dim stars, a few late fires, the dull green glow from the alchemists' blocky workshop.

It was a different sight when we returned with a hold full of brickells, sailors lying exhausted on the deck. I saw the city then. In the distance, the Old Maiden Mountain sent a white waterfall into the city like a crone's long hair. The hillside was her shoulders, hunched so much you could see them behind her face—the great matching windows of the Justice Hall on the right and the Arcane Academy on the left, really two wings of the same long edifice. Dormers above the massive round windows looked like eyebrows over eyeglasses. Then, spilling down the mountainside, next to the falls, were the homes of the well-born and well-fed and wealthy. The mountain shape made an arm to the right and sank low on the left, worn down by the water of the Borzh river with bridges over it going to the western districts and roadways. Mansions looked like the old woman's jewels, but off to the right by her arm, the great workshop glowed always, burning and stinking and churning out sparksteel, sparkglass, clutchwood, and the other alchemical wonders Borzhu exported all over the known world. Buildings became low and dingy and shabby as the ground leveled, the dyeing shops and tanneries backing up to the river so they could stain it before it emptied into the bay. Dockface faced the docks, and there I grew up, dirty and poor.

Borzhu was immense and grand and perhaps my first idea that the place I lived was so much more than my neighbors, my family, fish and freight and an endless supply of grubby cloth for mother to whiten. I had been taught to pray to the gods of the seven thrones, I had been warned not to speak ill of Secretarians, but until that day on that boat, so weary that it seemed I was asleep already, I realized that greatness and grandeur could be touched, could be something you could walk in. It was not only a dream for gods.

But I'm getting away from my story, which is about the laundry paddle.

The *Sunbird* taught me I didn't want to cook or sail, and I hardly had the arms to cart freight like my father. Mother looked askance at any work Delorge offered me, which were always short term jobs, adjusted on the fly, and rarely as well-paid as initially promised. I didn't want to be a laundress—I had seen mother rise resigned, and come home at nightfall weary and grey—but my parents would not tolerate a layabout.

Laundry-work felt, at first, much like cooking. I stood over something painfully hot and wet, adding things and stirring and, ultimately, pulling something out from the pot. But sodden sheets and breeches were far heavier than any bowl of fish stew. By noon my back ached and my arms trembled, and already my hands were red, blistered and cracking.

Mother said "Don't worry Ninki," as we sat outside in the shade of a tree with a thick trunk and low boughs, a plaque at its base declaring it an official wedding witness to the Aifo Skyfather and Seamother. "Hands get tough." She showed me hers, which were thick like barnacles, as they had always been, and I thought I might cry.

She may have seen it, for in the afternoon I was put on the unmentionable pot, where fine ladies' underthings were washed in a lighter, less abrasive detergent. I was told several times not to use more than one stone of it at the bottom, and not to let it boil but only simmer, as the soap was alchemical and extremely expensive.

Undergarment washing was not as bad. Yards of sodden cotton were replaced by tiny light scraps I initially guessed were hairnets. I was in a corner by a window, so the heat was less oppressive and no one was shouting at me to move faster. I thought that I might be able to survive as a laundress after all, and that made me both happy and sad, in a strange, surrendering way.

Secretarians were singing out the window, and their hymns are always so beautiful when you're far enough that you can't understand the words or see their masks. I know the song now—"Doom, doom to Borzhu, fire from the holy seed"—but they never sing it any more since it came true.

That day I didn't know it, and I made up my own words without really thinking about it. "*Smallskirts and teat-slings, simmer in the soapy pot. Fine ladies' fine things, washing them shall be my lot. White, pink and patterned, they are getting clean. I'd like to see them thrown in the ravine!*"

You know how a young girl can be. I'd made my silly song and was singing it under my breath, and then I started to stir in a pattern. Loops and swirls and curlicues instead of just around and around. I did a little dance, too, not unlike something Delorge had shown me, something the legging girls did at the Happy House, but smaller and less suggestive and more about footwork than hips. I

wasn't thinking anything much, and then scalding water was everywhere. I was soaked, I fell back and cried out, everyone turned to look at me.

I wept, and was scolded for spilling, and told that if anything was damaged it would come out of my pay.

I tried to tell them I couldn't work more, but they saw through me and put me back on the big tubs, with the heavy oars instead of the finer, lighter paddle I'd been using. Mother berated me all the way home because it turned out several garments could not be located and I was obviously to blame.

"We boiled skirts and sheets all day and shall have not even a half-shell coin to show for it! We lost money on that toil! Did you have even one thought in your head, Ninki?"

"No mother, not one," I said, and cried more. Supper was bread and fat with turnip slices, and my hands throbbed from their blisters and burns.

I had told no one that when the pot went over, I saw a few slips of silky fabric flying away, soaring off towards the river valley like tropical birds. I couldn't tell anyone. Who would believe?

That night I snuck out to meet Delorge, who always had a bundle of mint-twigs to chew. I think that was the night she had a pot of black lip color too and asked if I wanted it.

"Lips that shade, who would want it?"

"Nasty Monkey got it but when she tried it on, she changed her mind." Nasty Monkey was one of the women who worked with Delorge's mother, what they called a "peak." I had met Nasty Monkey a few times, a dancery woman, not as tall as a typical Oursculi. Prostitutes were held in particular shame by her people and never more so than when they were Oursculi themselves. The Happy House had an obscure door to an unlit back alley which the workers called "the Oursculi door," as it was used by clients who wished to enter and leave unseen, instead of having a leisurely drink, meal and show before taking their pleasures.

I pocketed the makeup and accepted a chewer.

"You work today?" I asked.

"Ran a few messages. One way uptown to a toff's house. The woman at the gate looked at me like I was shit on her shoe, didn't tip me so much as a dried bean. You? You laundered, right?"

"I laundered, right. To no benefit."

"What? They cheated you?" She shifted forward, ready to drum up some lads with staves and no sense to redress this injustice.

"I lost someone's garment, so my pay was docked."

Delorge swore, the way someone who is frequently exposed to sailors can. I shrugged.

"Tomorrow will be better, Ninks," she said.

"I launder once more tomorrow, to address the debt for today's error."

"Tomorrow will be better! You're no laundress. You are fated to surpass your mother," she insisted, and as it happened, she was right.

Mother and I rose early the next day and made our way to the washing-works, only to be told that I was not to work but to wait on the front step.

"She has a debt," mother said, glowering. "How is she to earn her way out from it on the stoop?"

"As of yester-even, the sum is discharged," the laundry-owner said. He stood a step above us, Oursculi and tall, with the blank expression they cultivated.

"What?"

"For her mischance, a taily-man unknown to me has made redress. With the girl he seeks words, and thus, upon the step she ought await his wheels."

"A taily-man? My daughter doesn't know any such person."

He shrugged. "As it has for years, your job awaits you, free and fair. For the girl, I have no toil."

"She's waiting here on your word, is she not to be paid for her time?"

"By my purse, no. Upon the blueskin's arrival, I encourage you to discuss the matter with him."

"Did he not say what he wanted?"

"To discuss her chore-rod, I presume."

"What?"

"Upon the night he came, bearing papers of entry from the law-house. In curious devices he sought council until he came upon the stir-stick Ninki applied to the garments during the accident. Away with it he went, but not without remuneration and strong words that I ought facilitate a meeting of him and her."

As I said, he was Oursculi and a formal one at that, as if he wished to prove to himself and all around him that he hadn't been changed from hiring so many Landbreakers to his business. His words, circling around and around everything, were only barely less wearying than stirring dirty clothes.

"You come get me when this merman appears," Mother said, frowning, and then she went in and I sat down. He did not keep me waiting long.

The wheelchair squeaked and the two chesty dogs pulling it panted as it cornered. A man of the sea sat within, his skin blue-green with his curly hair and beard matching it. He wore a brown velvet jacket and matching waistskirt over his muscular tail. The jacket was unbuttoned almost to his stomach, revealing a forest of chest-hair and a gold medallion with a thunderhead engraved on it. He wore round spectacles of smoked glass, as most of his people do when traveling on the surface. He held a carriage crop in one hand, but did not beat the dogs with it, just directed them with short taps. The crop went into a holster when he put his hands on the wheels to slow them. At the same time he squeezed his face closed, and the gills on his neck fluttered out a low, loud, groaning whistle. Hearing it, the dogs sat.

“Call me Seímu,” he said. “Guessing you’re Ninki, yes?”

I nodded. “My mother wants to be here while we talk.”

He sighed and nodded. When I returned with her, he had retrieved the paddle from a satchel attached to the spine of his chair.

“Use this yesterday?”

I glanced at mother, whose eyes were narrow.

Seímu grimaced. “Answer, you aren’t in trouble. Believe me, this is all official, I have papers.”

“I wouldn’t know an official paper from a fish wrapper,” mother replied.

“Tell me if you used this, please. It may be important.”

“I think so,” I said. “One laundry paddle is very like another.”

He squinted at me and tilted his head. He reached down beside his left thigh and brought up a stick covered with rings, which he briskly ran down his other arm to make the circles spin. They rattled as he shook the laundry stick, and mother’s kerchief flew off her head and launched itself through the still air for a couple dozen paces before fluttering to the ground.

Mother half-swore—just the first syllable before stopping herself.

“Tell me, why would you enchant this rod to make garments fly when you could just make it clean things better?”

“I enchanted nothing!”

His head-shake was impatient. “Come here and see.”

Mother had set off, in her deliberate way, to recover her head-scarf, so she didn’t see my look at her before I reluctantly moved closer. I could see that his wheelchair also had pockets on the inside of its armrests—that must have been where his wand of rings was stored. He rooted in the right pouch and brought forth a little gold comb with a bit of blue glass set into it.

“Hold this,” he said. “See? You’ve done sorcery in the last few days, whether you know it or not.”

“I see nothing of the sort,” I said.

“Hand it to your mother.”

I did, and the glass turned red. She frowned.

“Cast a spell, even a little one, and the glass goes blue,” he said. “Give it back, please.”

She complied. “My daughter cast a spell? How is that possible?”

“People do,” he said. “Someone had to be the first, right? So there are spontaneous casters, untutored folk—usually youths—who accidentally cultivate an enchantment.”

“You said I wasn’t in trouble, right?” I replied.

He rubbed his forehead. Face and posture alike suggested he didn’t want to be here.

“Come to the Arcane Academy. Study spellcraft and the associated disciplines. Cultivate your power.”

“Uh huh,” my mother said, unimpressed. “What if she can’t do it again?”

“She leaves. Many students do.”

Her eyes narrowed shrewdly. “Who pays for her time there?”

“Mother!”

He answered her slitted eyes by rolling his. “Pay *her* to learn? Are you thunder-addled? Learning enchantment nets her a city job for life. Even—between the two of us—even if her abilities fade away. Many families pay for their children to study, but for her, no cost is assessed.”

“She could also waste a year she won’t get back, fruitlessly studying and learning nothing.”

“Is that a no, then? I get paid for today’s work whether the girl joins or not.”

“How much?”

“*Mother!*”

“Crafting a proper wizard working earns me six bars.”

“Six *bars*?”

“Chasing students is just one.”

I pulled her sleeve. She frowned as I tugged her away. “I want to do it,” I said.

“Do you have any idea what’s involved?”

“Do you?”

She shrugged. I went back to the merman, who was whistling across his lips to make his dogs beg for little scraps of chickenleather.

“What would I have to do?” I asked.

He handed me the paddle. “Take this to the Arcane Academy today—there’s a red door in the back, all the way around on the west corner of the north side. That’s the student entrance. Show them this, and I’ll write you a note, and you can start tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Jumping in today would be awfully presumptuous, don’t you think?”

“What would I do though? Is it like school with reciting and problems on the chalkboard, or... or do I have to do trials and puzzles, or... initiations? Is there any danger?”

He barked one of those wet, sea-people laughs. “Fear nothing, except for the students, who are just young people and therefore cruel. You reached a place in yourself yesterday where a spell could grow. All the academy can do is try to get you back there and create the circumstances of magic. Casting a spell is like casting a net—sometimes you catch nothing, even if your throw was good. Forcing magic is impossible, even for the best of us. Making magic *possible*? That we can teach. Making it likely? Eh. That depends on you.”

With mother’s permission, I did exactly as he said, taking the long walk up the hill to the Governor’s Stair, past the Temple of the Seven Thrones, where true astrologer-priests sometimes got into fistfights with the frauds who squinted at the sky and told you what you wanted to hear. I walked by a four-person choir of Secretarians, chanting about the holiest darkness within, about the loneliness of those with nothing hidden. It was beautiful, but one of them had a disturbing mask—burlap glued over some kind of frame, with the worst features of wolf and crawfish. I circled the tall wall around the Kobolt mines, where Borzhu got silver and other, rarer materials from the speechless creatures under the earth. I was thinking about how tiresome it would be to walk all the way up the hill every morning and back down at night after a full day of sorcerous opportunity. I wondered how tired Seímu’s dogs got. I walked past tall and stately homes, painted gaily or somberly, stout and tidy manors belonging to the oldest Landbreaker families, then turned a corner and saw the vast conjoined halls of the Academy and the Justice Hall. This close, one could see that the great round window of the Justice Hall was etched lead to hold colored glass. It portrayed the night sky, a map of the stars with the seven thrones prominent. But the Academy window, just as big—and our whole house could have sailed through either window without touching the edge, if the glass had all been gone—it was plain, unfrosted, uncolored, a clear view out on the whole city and

to the ocean beyond. I later saw from the inside and noticed the tiny ripples at the bottom, where it had changed shape with age as old glass does. But that day it was just a massive plane of emptiness, as if air had a glimmer to it.

“Window strikes your fancy, does it? It’s so the wizards can look down on everybody.”

I turned to my left and saw a boy a few years older than me glaring up at the Academy.

“I beg your pardon?” I said.

“You’re one of ‘em, aren’t you?” He was a Landbreaker, like me (probably—down in dockface, ancestry is a muddled issue at best, and usually of little concern). He had a big nose, like a potato. “Spell slipped out of you like a fart and now you’re trying to smell it again? That, or they’re hiring a scullery.”

“What’s it to you?” My habit was to have a right-sized piece of masonry in my pocket, thin enough to wrap a fist all the way around with a little outside the top and bottom. Delorge had taught me the girl-fist—hitting with that little bit of rock, not the knuckles like an angry boy—as she’d been taught by some other dockface urchin-maid, back and back until the dawn of time, presumably. This boy, who had ugly teeth and suspicious eyes, moved closer and I slipped my hand in my pocket.

“Naught to me. Just get ready for disappointment. You look like you’ve had a taste of that in life.”

This boy wanted my agreement, wanted me to just be an echo of his thoughts. I decided not to be that.

“I suppose you’ve been inside and been washed out, like a bad stain?” I said.

He bristled. It had been a wild try, but clearly I’d put my hand on a spot that hurt.

“You’ll fail too. Most do. Us who fail up from the commons, we get the charity of cleaning windows or if you’re really lucky, carrying files and papers. Wizard children though, they can go through the whole school, learn nothing, never cast a spell, and still write the records and spin the stones.”

“I shall just have to ensure I’m one who stays,” I said. “I’d hate to end up like you.”

I turned, and left him muttering a word I’d last heard when a workman dropped a hammer on his foot.

The red door opened to my knock and an Oursculi woman with greying hair opened it. She had an open, curious expression—nothing at all like the laundry-lord who employed my mother.

“You would be who, then?” She spoke a little like a Landbreaker too.

“Ninki, ma’am. I enchanted this stir-stick, apparently?”

“Ooh, to do what?”

“Make undergarments fly.”

She laughed, then squinted as I handed her the note I had from Seímu’s hand.

“Up to learn the wizarding way, are you? Good luck. Flying underthings is a fine start, a fine start indeed. Show up tomorrow morning, about eight bells.”

“What should I bring?”

“Yourself. Oh, and a lunch, it’s not provided. Bring your laundry-lance there, or we can keep it for you.”

I looked at it, uncertainly.

“I’d leave it here,” she said. “No one’s likely to steal it, and making it work again is likely to be easier for you than starting with a whole new enchantment. It’s a thaumodoland now, and subject to the laws thereof.”

I had heard the word “thaumodoland,” but mostly in reference to magic swords or staves that flung lightning to the horizon. My stick seemed to have little in common with them.

“Laws regarding thaumo... thaumodolands, you say.” I gave a weak smile, hoping it was a winning one. “As it happens, I never studied law.”

“Objects enchanted are classified as thaumodolands, and become the property of their wizard creator, though should the item be of value its previous owner may make claim of recompense, as determined by a three-person panel containing no more than one enchanter,” she said, as if speaking from rote.

“Upon the maker’s death, the thaumodoland becomes the property of Arcane Academy, as do all such objects of undetermined provenance, though special petition may be filed by a magic-practicing descendent to acquire use rights.”

“Seímu—the wizard who found me—he bought this from the man who had it,” I said.

“No, he just claimed it. It matters not who owned it pre-enchantment, it is now city property. Pending your death of course.”

I found myself hugging the stick protectively, then realizing how foolish that must seem.

“There are hundreds and hundreds of small-use devices of this sort in the Repository,” she said, smiling gently. “Leave it here, I’ll pop it in the locker and write you a receipt in case someone else is watching the door tomorrow.”

“Do I owe Seímu any money?”

“Did he say you did? If not, I wouldn't bother.”

“Why did he pay off the laundry-house owner though?”

She shrugged. “I don't know Seímu that well, but my guess? My guess is, it was easier for him to throw a few shells at the problem than bother explaining it. How much could this stick cost?”

I didn't explain my debt, I just thanked her, exchanged my laundry-rod—my “thaumodoland”—for her note, and started the long walk back down the hill.

“I can't believe you're going to be an enchantress!” Delorge said later, fairly quivering with excitement. She'd come to our house with a giant tureen of Borzhu Delight, which was available in dockface only from the Happy House, but the smell of it was so wonderful that mother agreed to let us eat it despite where it came from. Delorge stayed, of course. Mother could hardly put her out after she brought such a feast.

“Is this really made from sixty-one different ingredients?” Brack asked her, angling around father for another serving to fuel his growing young bones.

“It is of course, the first being some left over from a previous batch, so you can only make it if you're making lots and have been making it for some time. But it's your sister's big night! I want to hear everything about the Academy and about doing enchantment!” Delorge said.

I told her and, afterwards, she blinked.

“That's it?”

I nodded.

“You feel a special way and magic comes out of you?”

I shrugged.

“You should try it now then!”

“No!” my mother said. “Not in my house! Things flying everywhere may be fine at her academy but I want no such madness in my home. It's mad enough.”

Father played his three-strings for a bit after dinner, and I slept poorly from excitement before rising and walking, once more, up to the Academy. A different attendant was, indeed, at the red door, this one with the thin blue eyes of an Aifo seafarer. I was given my stick and introduced to Jiahel, a girl a few years older than me who was visibly delighted by my presence.