

# NEKO

By Richard Tornello

Neko's ebony sword, a wakizashi, created from unobtainium, lies beside her as she sleeps, as it did when her tiny body was discovered in a cove by the Sorceress years ago. The Sorceress had to keep the infant's hand close to the sword in order to move it. Some how the sword was organically connected to Neko, in a manner that was beyond the sorceress's understanding. She could not lift it. No amount of magic would work.

The Sorceress dared not, nor could she take it from Neko. For some reason she never felt threatened by the strange metal weapon that was propped up by the child's bed. In fact she felt just the opposite, even though she had no power to use it.

She could manipulate the child. That was power enough. She kept a close watch on Neko

The sword has features that only Neko can arouse. The sword, light and indestructible, will open up a claw like feature in the hilt upon close quarters combat. It links to her mind in a mysterious fashion and they become as one.

A long swan was engraved into back of the hilt that glows any time Neko touches it. Two gold crane motifs are cast, on either side, just under her hands grasp. The sword guard is made of the same strange metal deeply imbedded with an intricate geometric design and covered in thick gold leaf. The gold leaf is pounded into the metal giving a wood block like, engraved image to the designs underneath.

If any but Neko attempted to take the sword, it would instantly acquire a mass that was beyond the ability of the offender to lift. The sword is hers, a gift from the gods.

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The ancient city is in ruins. The glistening marble in the piazza, it is now encrusted by mold, moss, and algae the color of bile. The aqueducts were destroyed by repeated invasions in the past. The highways, overgrown, straight line indentations, lead to nowhere but death. The world outside the city is being encapsulated by an emerging forest.

The extensive infrastructure that supported the city is all but nonexistent. The sanitary system is an open sewer. The stench of death and offal are the springtime perfumes. No one stays long. The faces are covered to repel the odors.

Considering one's health and well being, it is too dangerous to remain center-city other than for a few daylight hours. In the remaining hours, the rats, thieves and kidnappers hold court.

No one has the training to maintain the old world. And even if they did, it would be impossible to accomplish in this world of chaos and quick death.

Brute power is the only arbiter. The Sorceress likes it like that. She is the only entity with an organized force. She has physical and magical strength. She is the ultimate law.

The Sorceress's once beautiful body covered in art tattoos, is now a walking horror of color that ran from a fading green mush to smeared black and blues. The vivid reds, yellows and other tints had long since disappeared. One might think that the color reflected her soul for she was once physically extremely attractive.

She keeps herself covered all the time to hide the disfiguration that came upon her. In the hottest weather her clothing would be dark to hide the marbling colors yet light enough not to cause too much discomfort.

The Sorceress observes it all, all there is to see, and is content. No one approaches who she does not summon. She fears no man and answers to no name. Only the chosen have names. The sorceress respects power. To know her name would be to have power over her.

"All those human beasts down there in the streets, those without names, they have no power and have no rights." She utters to no one in particular. She glared at Neko. Neko looks up from her training. She has just been thrown by one of her trainers. And in a fashion, that is what the Sorceress has done to Neko, her ward. Her true identity is kept from her. Without a name there is no legitimacy and no recognition. Neko is only known as Neko the Foundling, ward of the Sorceress. That is no name.

"Being my ward is something, and better than nothing. You could be one of them," pointing to those outside her residence. This is reiterated by the Sorceress countless times.

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Neko knows there were better times. She can see the ruins and Neko can read. She has a secret place. From the past buried deep in one of the buildings in the enclave Neko discovered an old metal encased vault of room, when she was a child, a place to hide away when she needed the solitude. Little did she know that it was sheathed lead and made of ancient steel. That combination of metals kept the Sorceress vision from penetrating

Now the room was her library. "Reading is my escape from all this," Neko whispers to her sword. "I know there is something about me the sorceress fears. What exactly, I do not know. She is not actually mean to me. I can't complain. I am treated with a modicum of respect. There is no love." The sword's swan glows.

"Reading is something the Sorceress is not aware that I can do. She assumes she knows everything about me. One day I will surprise her. These books may give me what I require."

Neko has no name, no family and no roots. Without those links, being alone, one has no chance of life except by being taken in as she has been. Others are not so lucky. They are made slaves or worse, in her case, being female, prostitution.

And she is the Great Sorceress's ward. Neko the Foundling with no name is beyond reproach. She is protected. She free to do as she pleases. But what pleases her most is her search for her family. And that does not please the Sorceress. For the most part Neko keeps that part to herself. Every now and then it comes out. The girl-warrior is all the Sorceress is allowed to vision.

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Launching herself from a rooftop, spinning, Neko ricocheted off the building walls, and planted her landing. Her facial complexion, flushed from exertion, is a pleasant mixture of black, ginger and white. When she would stare out of her dark green eyes, no one could hold that stare.

It was known that there were maybe a few local beings, having a similar pigmentation. It was believed they were the distantly related, possibly bastards of the deposed royal family. They had no names, no benefactors and they were treated worse than a regular person. They would be abandoned upon birth to perish. The grim reminder of a past long gone brought out the worst parts of the human animal. No family needed that additional burden as part of their daily existence.

Everybody noticed Neko's coloration. No one said a thing. They would glance at her as she passed by, then just as quickly, lower their heads or pull their hood lower so as not to be observed staring.

Neko was oblivious that her being was an indication of past rule, of the fair and just world that had existed. The Sorceress knew and used Neko as a badge of legitimacy enhancing her stature.

Neko was petite, agile and fearless. She would accept any challenge from man, woman or beast. She got bloody but never lost a combat. There was something about her and that sword. It seemed to guide her in combat, as if it knew what the opponent had in mind and could communicate that to Neko. It was claimed the swan glowed when she touched the hilt.

The sword could cut through anything. It never scratched or dinged. The deep ebony color was always polished. It rang when contact was made. And yet, the sword was light in Neko's grasp. It never left Neko's person, ever.

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"I'm a foundling. Where, who is my family? I must know, please." Neko would question the Sorceress.

"You are who you are. You are my ward. Accept that as it is," the Sorceress would say ending any conversation.

"I have to be someone. Look at this sword!" she would yell back. "I AM someone. And you know. TELL ME!" she would scream.

"Neko, to your room."

The sorceress would place a spell of silence upon Neko that lasted a day; sometimes more.

The assistants would quickly leave the area when this started. Her screams could be heard on the streets. How she could get away with what any other creature would be killed for, no one knew. That fact alone gave Neko a legitimacy that the Sorceress could not even begin to understand.

No one dared speak loud of it. Neko saw their furtive glances as they scurried away.

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Neko brooked no insult.

One day she was in the path of a monstrous warrior. She was about to move out of his path but he shouted, "Out of my way," and he spit in her direction and then added, "Foundling."

"I have a name!" He had hit a raw spot.

"Neko the Foundling? That's a name?" the warrior scoffed.

His sword was not sheathed. It was planted in the ground in front of him. His gauntleted hand rested on the hilt. He was looking for a fight. It didn't matter with whom or what. It could be a dragon, a warrior, another brute like himself, it didn't matter. It was his life. He had a reputation to uphold. Neko had a reputation too. This would be one more for his fame.

"A girl with a sword?" He laughs the question. "This will be a snack he thought," he thought and looking at her, "That's a damned good idea. She does look good enough to eat."

With a cool head she drew her sword. Then faster than his eye could follow, she made a mid air leap to the nearest building. She rebounded off a wall and spinning into a tight ball to gain momentum. This gave Neko the advantage of speed and power. Her sword finished the rest of the discussion.

The warrior lay on the ground dismembered. His sword was still planted in the ground, his gauntleted hand still attached. Neko looked around as the people turned their heads away.

This was noticed by a like colored serf. He did not turn away as quickly as the others. Neko did not notice him.

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Getting away from the urban decay, a forest was growing back and reclaiming that which was not cultivated. Neko felt she was beyond the vision of the Sorceress out here. She felt free and unencumbered.

The wind was blew through her hair turning it into a knotted mess. She did not care. Swinging from the vines in the nearby wood, Neko noticed movement in the bushes below. Flinging herself, using momentum and training she made herself into a spinning ball. Neko propelled her lithe body toward the movement. Her eyes shown brightly. Her smile was tight but wide.

"YOU, halt or die!" she demanded, landing silently, cat like.

The bush shook. From the other side a serf dropped something dark. Bowing low quivering like a leaf he pleaded, "Please do not harm me I was picking berries. I saw you flying through the air. I was struck by your agility, Your Grace."

Neko gently slid her wakizashi from its scabbard. Two mons, the golden cranes, reflected the sun, blinding the serf.

"I know you have no name, but what do You call yourself?" Neko demanded.

His hands rose slowly, to indicate no evil intent, blocking the glare of the swords mons.

"Lady Neko, I have no name. I am called Man-child. And that is all."

"Man-child come closer. I want to see your face."

Quaking, bowing, he approached.

"Stop. Look at me," she commanded.

"I dare not. It is forbidden."

"I unforbid it. Eye to eye Man-child. Do it!"

"If I am discovered I will die. I have been warned. Please don't force me." He was blubbering.

"I will never say anything. Now gaze at me and I will the same of you."

He looked up.

"Stand straight Man-child."

As commanded he rose to his full height which was a few centimeters taller than Neko.

She looked him up and down. She observed no likely weapon.

She sat down. "Now, you sit right there," she ordered pointing to a spot in front of her. One hand held the unsheathed black wackizashi as she laid it across her bare well formed calico legs. The other pointed to the exact spot she wanted him until he sat.

She noticed him staring.

Nako laughed, her eyes sparkling with a new found pleasure, and tapped him with the sword.

He quickly brushed it away. His green eyes glared at hers.

She sprang to her feet instantly, sword up, stance in a defensive posture. Her eyes flared wide. The claw instantaneously appeared. She looked him over.

He did nothing. He just sat there as he had been. He looked directly into her.

Neko took note. The claw retracted and was quickly mounted in the scabbard. Neko back flipped, grabbed a vine and was gone. Before she disappeared he heard her say, "I will see you again."

"I knew it," she said to herself. "She's hiding something from me. The Sorceress is afraid of something. I know I was found in a cove, this sword by my side. No one can use it but me. But He brushed it away. I sense he is not really afraid."

Scaling the walls to her benefactor's quarters, Neko silently entered a passage way that lay behind the study. Therein, the Sorceress was confiding to some troll that she used to do her dirty work.

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"Kill the Man-child. I saw them together on my screen. If she discovers her real name, and his we are doomed. They are both of the royal line. I kept her alive because she gives me the legitimacy to rule. The folk would never rise against me with her at my side. I had no idea about him. How did he stay hidden? I see all."

The troll nods and picks up a weapon among the few weapons the sorceress has laid out.

"No, use these and leave them in this house. She points to one house on the map. "They have been stirring up trouble. The evidence you leave will end that issue."

Neko's eyes narrowed, her teeth bared, her hands went to the hilt, and the claws emerged.

The troll died instantly without a sound. The sorceress was next.

She sat in her chair waiting for Neko. "Yes, I knew it would come to this. I was hoping for a different ending. I am sorry dear Nako, but your time is up. I will rule without you. The masses are but sheep and fodder. "

"Before I die, tell me who I am. I must know. I have that right!"

"You're stalling. I will tell you that you are more than you can imagine. Your pigmentation and wakizashi affirm that. But my little Neko, you are standing on the exact spot you should be. In a few seconds you will be plunging to your death just like the rest of your ancient family."

"You killed them?"

"Not all. Obviously. You exist." She thought of the other one but didn't say anything.

Neko pleaded again, "I've been searching for my history, my family, my Name. No one would say. I must know. How can I be anyone if I don't know who my family is? "

"As I commanded. Now give it up and say good-by dear. I will miss..."

Tiapan venom dipped darts, fired in quick succession, pierced the body of the Sorceress.

"This... I never ... oh my. Where did you..." She still had the nerve connections to hit the switch.

The calico youth, holding a semi-automatic crossbow made of the same metal as Neko's sword in one hand, pulled Neko away from the maw of the trap door as it swung open with the other.

"Lady Neko, we do meet again," he smiled and continued with a bow, "as you fore told."

The End