

Neko

by **Richard Tornello**

Neko's sword, a *wakizashi* with a coal-black blade, 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 must keep the infant's hand close to the sword in order to move it. Somehow the sword is connected to Neko, in a manner 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 keeps a close watch on Neko.

The sword has features that only Neko can arouse. The sword, light and indestructible, conceals a claw-like blade in the hilt for use in close combat. It links to her mind in a mysterious fashion and they become as one.

A long swan, engraved into back of the hilt, glows like lightning as Neko touches it. Two gold crane mons are cast, on either side, just under her hand's grasp. The sword guard is made of the same strange metal deeply imbedded with an intricate geometric designs 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 attempt to take the sword, it instantly acquires a mass 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 is encrusted by mold, moss, and algae the color of bile. The aqueducts were destroyed by repeated invasions in the past; all that remains are occasional crumbling archways and piles of rubble. 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 once supported the city is all but gone. 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 ones 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 kidnapers 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 she wears robes dark and opaque enough 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 glares 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," she says, 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. When she was a child, Neko discovered an old metal encased vault of a room buried deep in one of the buildings in the enclave, a place to hide away when she needed the solitude. Little did she know that it was sheathed in lead and made of ancient steel. That combination of metals kept the Sorceress's vision from penetrating

Now the room is 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. She treats me with a modicum of respect -- but 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 is free to do as she pleases, except when the Sorceress deigns to give her some task to occupy her time.

But what pleases Neko 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 ricochets off the building walls, and plants her landing. Her face, flushed from exertion, is a pleasant mixture of black, ginger and white. When she stares out of her dark green eyes, no one can withstand her gaze for long.

A few local beings are known to have pigmentation like Neko's. It is believed they were distantly related, possibly bastards of the deposed royal family. They have no names, no benefactors and they are treated worse than a regular person. Their kind are abandoned at birth to perish -- a grim reminder of a past long gone. No family needs the additional burden of a throwback to an ancient bloodline as part of their daily existence.

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

Neko is oblivious of her resemblance to the old royal line, of the fair and just world that had existed. But the Sorceress knows and uses Neko as a badge of legitimacy enhancing her stature.

Neko is petite, agile and fearless. She accepts any challenge from man, woman or beast. Although she is sometimes bloodied, she never loses a battle. There is something about her and that sword. It seems to guide her in combat, as if it knows what the opponent has in mind and communicates that knowledge to Neko. Observers claim that the swan glows when she touches the hilt.

The sword cuts through anything without suffering so much as a scratch or dent. The deep ebony color remains flawless, like an obsidian mirror, no matter how it is used or abused. It rings like a finely-crafted silver bell when it strikes another blade -- and it seems as if it is that very sound that shatters or cleaves the other sword (or the armor, or spear, or skull) when contact was made. And yet, the sword is light in Neko's grasp. It never leaves Neko's person, ever.

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"I'm a foundling. Where, who is my family? I must know, please," Neko questions the Sorceress at every opportunity.

"You are who you are. You are my ward. Accept that as it is," the Sorceress says, intending to cut the conversation short.

"I have to be someone. Look at this sword!" Neko cries. "I am someone in my own right, not just 'your ward'. And you know. *Tell me!*"

"Neko, to your room," the Sorceress commands. When Neko does not obey immediately, the sorceress places a spell of silence upon the girl that lasts a day; sometimes more.

The assistants quickly leave the area whenever one of these episodes began. Neko's screams could be heard on the streets. That Neko still lives after making demands of the Sorceress earns her a legitimacy that the Sorceress could not even begin to understand.

No one dares speak loud of it. Neko sees their furtive glances as they scurry away, and smiles fiercely though she cannot make a sound.

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Neko brooks no insult.

One day she finds herself in the path of a monstrous warrior. She is about to move out of his path, but stops when he shouts, "Out of my way," and spits in her direction. She still intends to step aside until the man sneers and mutters, "Foundling."

"I have a name!" Neko shouts.

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

His sword is not sheathed. It stands planted in the ground in front of him. His gauntleted hand rests on the hilt.

Neko frowns. The man is looking for a fight. It doesn't matter with whom or what. It could be a dragon, a warrior, another brute like himself, it doesn't matter. Fighting is his life. He has a reputation to uphold -- and he knows that Neko has a reputation too. To defeat her would greatly enhance his fame.

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

With a cool head Neko draws her sword. Then faster than his eye can follow, she leaps to the nearest building. She rebounds off a wall and spins into a tight ball to gain momentum. This gives her speed and power beyond what her small size promises. Her sword finishes the rest of the discussion, shearing through sword, armor, flesh and bone like a scythe through straw.

The warrior lies on the ground, dismembered, his sword still planted in the ground, his gauntleted hand still attached. Neko looks around as the people turn their heads away.

One man -- a serf -- does not turn away as quickly as the others. His face bears patterns in black, ginger, and white like Neko's.

Neko does not notice him, being more concerned with the few drops of blood that have stained her clothing.

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Getting away from the urban decay, a forest is growing back and reclaiming that which was once cultivated. Neko feels that she is beyond the vision of the Sorceress out here. She feels free and unencumbered.

The wind blows through her hair turning it into a knotted mess. She does not care. Swinging from the vines in the nearby wood, Neko notices movement in the bushes below. She tucks her body into a tight ball and launches herself toward the movement. Her eyes shine brightly. Her smile is tight but wide.

"*You!* Halt or die!" she demands, landing silently, cat like.

The bush shakes. From the other side a serf drops something dark. Bowing low, quivering like a leaf, he pleads, "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 slides her *wakizashi* from its scabbard. Two mons, the golden cranes, reflect the sun, blinding the serf.

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

His hands rise slowly, to indicate no evil intent, blocking the glare of the sword's 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 approaches.

"Stop. Look at me," she commands.

"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 blubbers.

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

He looks up.

"Stand straight, Man-child."

As commanded he rises to his full height -- a few centimeters taller than Neko.

She looks him up and down. She observes no likely weapon.

She sits down. "Now, you sit right there," she orders, pointing to a spot in front of her. One hand holds the unsheathed black *wakizashi* as she lays it across her bare, well-formed calico legs. With the other hand, she points to the spot where she wants him to sit.

After he lowers himself to the ground, she notices that he is staring at her.

Neko laughs, her eyes sparkling with a new found pleasure, and tapped him with the sword.

He quickly brushes it away. His green eyes glare at hers.

She springs to her feet instantly. The sword is up with the blade pointing at him, her feet shifting into a defensive posture and her eyes are slits. The hidden claw-like blade instantaneously appears. She peers at Man-child, looking for any hint of hostile intent.

Man-child does nothing. He just sits there, returning her emerald stare with his own.

Neko blinks, recognizing the same penetrating gaze she has seen in the mirror a thousand times. The claw-blade retracts into the sword-hilt, and she slides the sword back into its scabbard. Leaping high, she grabs a vine and disappears into the leafy shadows above. But before she vanishes from sight, she says, "I will see you again."

The serf gets to his feet and moves quickly away, his stride quick and graceful for someone who seemed terrified only moments before.

Neko watches him go, the memory of his facial markings and his bright green eyes fixed in her mind. "I knew it," she says to herself. "The Sorceress *is* hiding something from me. She is afraid of something. I know I was found in a cove, this sword by my side. No one can use it but me. No one can stand before it. But *he* brushed it away. And he was not really afraid."

Scaling the walls to her benefactor's quarters, Neko silently enters a passageway that lies behind the study. Therein, the Sorceress is speaking to a troll. "Kill the Man-child," the Sorceress says. "I saw him with Neko in my scrying mirror. 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.

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

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

Neko's eyes narrow and her lips draw back from her teeth; her hands grip the hilt of her sword, and the claw-blade emerges.

The hidden door bursts open and Neko emerges like a whirling shuriken blade, the sword a shadowy blur in her hands. The troll died instantly without a sound.

The sorceress would be next.

She sits in her chair calmly waiting for Neko. "Yes, I knew it could come to this. I was hoping for a different ending. I am sorry dear Neko, but your time is up. I will rule without you. The masses are but sheep and fodder. They will bow to power. What a waste of energy and life."

"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 wakizachi affirm that."

Neko says something that has been in the back of her mind but unarticulated. It was a recent epiphany. "Your tattoos were your attempt to match my colors, weren't they? I have something you want, something you desire more than need."

The Sorceress is taken off guard.

Neko continues, "The tattoos may have worked in the beginning. But the color couldn't hold against the being you truly are. The colors ran. Look at you. You're hideous. Mine are pure and don't run. Why you kept me alive all these years is beyond me. You really didn't need me. You had the power. It was something else wasn't it?"

The Sorceress is in shock and in a rage. She screams, "How dare you! Where did you get that information? Where were you during those times I couldn't locate you. Where were you?"

"Reading dear ruler, reading. I can do that. You'd be surprised. You thought I was just your little smart but uneducated warrior girl, your human pet."

"You have really sealed your death warrant. I will tell you my dear are the result of a mating between a God and a human. Only such creatures have that coloration. Your wakizachi holds a clue to your birth origins. Those cranes are sacred to one greater than I am." She is shaking with rage.

Getting control of herself the Sorceress hisses, "But my dear 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." The Sorceress begins to reach for a switch.

Neko asks another question that stops the Sorceress. "You killed them. I always suspected it. But you kept me?"

"Not all. Obviously. You exist." She thinks of the other one -- 'Man-child', somehow hidden from her sorcery until this day. That fact boils inside her and how *he* got away from her. *He'll be next* she says to herself.

"But I too exist," says a voice.

The Sorceress stops what ever she was about to do to Neko and turns quickly toward the location of the voice. Her hands come up and point toward the voice.

Man-child steps out from the same spot Neko emerged from earlier. He is unaffected by whatever it is the Sorceress just attempted.

“I followed you.” he says to Neko not taking his eyes off the Sorceress and continues.

To the Sorceress he states, “I have the sign of the Owl on my weapon.” It’s a multi-shot crossbow made from the same material as Neko’s. It is a gift from the Gods. My Mother is one you know too and a favorite of her father. I know all that. I am protected and beyond your power.

“Do you remember the huntsman you had search and kill any that looked as our kind, all those years back?” The youth asks this with vengeance. “He couldn’t bring himself to do what you had commanded. He told me the whole story when I was younger. He explained the symbol on my weapon. He like you couldn’t lift it without my touch. He hid me and a scroll with his family. He mentioned Neko. I’ve watched her for years.”

“I killed him for disloyalty years ago,” declares the Sorceress with a smile.

Man-child continues, “Yes I know, and we both know Neko is the daughter of my Mother’s father thus the Crane and Swan. What you never noticed were the lightning bolts engraved in the sword guard. That would have told it all. You were too enamored by the child Neko.”

Neko is taking this all in while slowly inching off the trap door toward the Sorceress. Her wakizachi is not lifted high in her formal attack mode, but low. This was a new tactic she picked up fighting the giant warrior some time ago. He didn’t expect that either.

The blade sweeps up in a short arc as Neko springs off the trap door.

The Sorceress who has been hypnotized by this youth and his story turns too late to escape. The blade of one thought fulfills its duty.

Tiapan venom-dipped darts, fired in quick succession, all pierce the body of the Sorceress.

"This... I never ... She still had the nerve connections to hit the trap door switch.

The calico youth, holding a semi-automatic crossbow made of the same metal as Neko's sword in one hand, grabs Neko's arm with the other and pulls her away from the maw of the trap door as it drops away.

"Lady Neko, we do meet again," he says, bowing. "As you foretold.

"My name is Tigris."

THE END