

THE NECROMANCER

By Savannah Hernandez

Chapter 1: The Client

Zorione popped in the brilliant green, glass eyes into the sockets of Mrs. Weaver's dead cat. She grabbed a brush, giving a few strokes to the fur that had been soaked in chemicals, the body stiff from taximerzaiton. A few strands of greying red hair fell from her bun and was tucked behind her ear. Her silver eyes squinted to inspect her work; crow's feet scraped further into her skin, and the lines that had long frowned her face grew more bold. Her final verdict: *Good enough.*

Sweeping Mrs. Weaver's cat from the counter into her large, slender hands, Zorione placed her finished work onto a metal shelf in the back room next to the potted aloe vera plant. The clattering noise didn't interrupt the gurgling snores of Mr. Hex, her father, who sat in his chair with his bald, lackluster head craned back, arms dangling over the armrests and legs sprawled out far apart with toes pointed up. Zorione worked at her father's taxidermy shop, Zauber Taxidermists, for thirty-seven years. She never understood why her father loved the practice so much. If her mother wasn't cremated, Zorione was sure that her father would've taxidermied her. Actually, maybe that's why her mother wanted to become tree fertilizer. She chuckled flatly. Zorione often thought of becoming ash; the idea of becoming nutrients for a tree felt pleasant, but she knew that she'd only poison the soil instead. Ash, casket burial, or taxidermization, she knew she would be stuck in a limbo where her body would waste and mean nothing to the earth. A sad thought— even in death, she'd waste away. The chiming of the door's bell alerted her of a new customer. Zorione rolled her shoulders and returned to the front.

A five year old girl too short for her age came shuffling in. She wore a powder blue dress

that hung on her like a flour sack and pink neon flip-flops. The frozen displays of the tall grizzly bear and perched rainbow-feathered birds in mid-take off captured her black eyes for just a moment before she looked elsewhere, biting on her forefinger knuckle to where her tan colored skin turned white. Zorione knew this girl; Nekane Seelenfreund, a foster child, was currently living with the Fabel family in the apartment down the hall. One day last year, Zorione had heard terrible, powerful screaming, pounding, and things breaking— Zorione called Child Protective Services because she thought they were beating the little girl. After the investigation was done, it turned out that Nekane threw a temper tantrum because she didn't want anyone to brush or even touch her hair. Nekane brushes her own hair now; her thick, black curls remained frizzy and defying gravity. Zorione ignored any unsettling noises that came from the apartment since.

“Nekane, what are you doing here?” Zorione waited for an adult figure to come through the door. “Are you here alone? — I can't babysit you. Where's Mrs. and Mr. Fabel?”

Nekane gazed up at Zorione's towering figure, over the woman's head, before looking down to her curled toes. She slid thirteen pennies, one at a time, all faced up, onto the counter. Last, she placed a photo of herself with a white and brown terrier mutt. “I would like to buy your magic, please, Ms. Hex. My dog died.”

“My what? — honey, I don't do magic.” Zorione dragged her palm up her cheek, causing a red shade to color her pale skin. “Do you want me to call someone to pick you up? Do you know their phone number?”

Nekane rocked her whole body, forward and back. She bit her tongue and tugged on her dress at the belly. Her eyes rapidly blinked a few times, her mouth gaped open with the sound being delayed by a few seconds. “You're a witch.”

“What did you call me?” Zorione squared her shoulders, her balled hands pressed against her hips.

“I know you’re a witch— a necromancer.” Nekane kept rocking. “It’s okay— I’m different, too. I’m a changeling.”

“A change-what? And I’m a witch? You mean magic stuff?”

“Mmhm.” Back and forth.

“Yeah, sure— listen, kid, I’m not a witch. I don’t do magic. This is a taxidermy shop— we stuff dead things.”

Back and forth. Back and forth. Pulling her hair forward, her curls wrapped around her fingers, hiding the bitemarks. “You have magic— I know you do. I hear that you do witchcraft all the time! You can bring Copper back— like the other animals here!”

“I can’t bring your dead dog back to life; the dead stay dead— these animals here? Dead. Your dog? Dead. You wouldn’t want to stuff him either. People come in and do that, but it’s gross. It’s creepy. It’s not right. You don’t want to be like that. Other children will call you weird and pick on you and be mean. You don’t want that to happen, right?” *It probably happens anyway.*

Rocking, Nekane kept swaying her body as her tiny hands tugged on her hair. Her hands started to tug harder, her curls straightening out as she kept up the repetitive yanking motions. Her lips curled and her eyes squinted, as if in pain. She wouldn’t stop the yanking. Rocking back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

“Nekane? Are...you okay?”

“M-Mmmmm!” Nekane hummed. She kept humming. She kept yanking.

“Nekane— Nekane, stop!” Zorione came around and, unsure what to do and with panic,

grabbed Nekane's hands by the wrists, holding on to stop her from pulling hair out. "Nekane, stop rocking! Use your words!"

"Mm!" That was a "no."

What do I do? Why is she even here alone? I can't do this!

Nekane's hums broke into deep, monotone wails as tears streamed down her face. She tried to break free from Zorione's grip. When rocking back, she tried to throw her whole body away, but when it failed Nekane then, on the rock forward, curled within herself.

Great— she's crying! What do I do? "Okay! I'll bring Copper back to life!"

Nekane's wails died down to a soft whine. "You will? With your magic?"

"Yeah." Zorione released her hold on the girl in a resigned way.

"How?" Nekane's round eyes grew wide with curiosity.

"It'll have to be done during the night of the New Moon— to give an old soul a new life — and then I'll bring him to you the next morning." Zorione scooped the pennies back into her hand and returned them back to the girl. "And a soul has no monetary value— it doesn't have a price, exactly. You're going to have to do something else for my service."

"What can I give you then?" Nekane asked with furrowed brows of concern, both hands cupping the coins. "I only have thirteen pennies— I want Copper back!"

Zorione left to the back and return with the potted plant, setting it on the counter. "Give me another aloe vera plant— it can be bigger or smaller than this, just give me a new one; I'll need it since this one will be used for the spell next week."

"A new aloe vera." Nekane rubbed the leafy appendages between her fingers.

"Another thing— you *can't* tell anyone I'm a magical witch, okay?"

"A secret?"

“Yeah, a secret between us magic folk, okay?”

“A secret.” Nekane whispered, laying a finger to her lips.

What am I doing?

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Chapter 3:

Zorione knocked on apartment 311’s apartment door, the Fabel residence, while balancing the light brown wicker basket in her other hand that held a soft lump that would rise and fall covered by a green blanket. The taxidermist waited nervously, unsure what to say or how to explain the situation to Mr. and Mrs. Fabel— she hadn’t ask for their thoughts and permission on the matter, and it was much too late to do it now. Hopefully they would accept her apology when it was time for her to give it— which was probably soon.

Instead, it was Nekane who answered the door, avoiding eye contact and giving a muffled answer with her knuckle in the back of her teeth. “Hello, Ms. Hex.”

“Oh, Nekane— where’s your parents?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember them.”

That’s sad. “Oh, uh, no, I meant your guardians, I guess.”

“Oh. Not here.”

There was a moment of silence between them. “So where are they?”

“Out.”

“Out? Do you know when they’ll be back?”

Nekane shook her head, pulling her hair forward. There as another moment of silence. Nekane rocked a little before asking in a voice that tried to sound older and polite as an adult, “Please, Ms. Hex, come in—”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Oh. I’ll step out then—”

“That’s not a good idea either.” *You shouldn’t have even answered the door.* “Doing this through the doorway should be fine.”

Zorione knelt down and pulled the blanket off and revealed a small, sleeping pup— a terrier mix that was white with brown spots. Nekane’s knuckle slipped from her mouth that gapped open, and her eyes fixed on the living creature. She inhaled when the pup started squirming and whining, stretching its short arms and legs, curling its head.

Nekane didn’t speak a word. She stuck her finger in the basket and poked its soft head and body. She picked up specks of greyish-brown dust from the fir, rubbing it between her finger and thumb. The little girl grabbed Zorione’s free hand, inspecting her palms that looked clean, but noticed some kind of dirt underneath the nails, close to the cubicles. It wasn’t until she saw this evidence that Nekane scooped the young dog into her arms.

“Is it really Copper?! Is it really?!”

“Of course it is!” Zorione quickly answered, almost with a sense of pride, and smirked. “I really worked hard on this one.”

“Why does he look small like a puppy though?”

“You try making a whole dog skeleton from stoneware clay in a short amount of time, kid.”

“You made him from clay? How did you do it?”

“It wasn’t easy; I had to start really early in the morning.” Zorione set the basket aside to use her hands to talk— making long, slender gestures with her fingers and squeezing motions.

“Had to sculpt an entire skeleton from stoneware clay— I had to make a new body since the old

one was no good. I sculpted and shaped every bone and every teeth, then I baked it in the fire so that it can stay strong and firm.”

Nekane sat down with the now awake but drowsy Copper. “What else did you do?”

“I had to make his fur from cotton— *pure* and *natural* cotton.” Zorione said with emphasis, making plucking motions. “I borrowed some from a friend’s garden since mine weren’t in ready yet. And the aloe vera? I used half of the plant I had to make a jelly for the eyes, and then the other half into a liquid to create Copper’s blood. I dyed the eyes and fur to recreate what I saw in the photo.”

“It really does look like him— if he was a puppy!” Nekane smiled, petting the puppy’s head and occasionally brushing her cheek against the fur.

“That wasn’t even the hard part.” Zorione continued, her voice sounding more confident and speaking faster with enthusiasm. “Part of the ritual is burying the new ‘body’ in the ground where there’s rich soil— since the dead are often buried underground— and invite the spirit to come back! I never force a spirit to come back— they always have to come back on their own.”

“How did you get Copper to come on his own?”

“I had to put candles around where I buried the new body I made, in a circle, and burn sage in the center.” Zorione explained, drawing an imaginary picture in the floor with her finger. “At first, I tried to bribe him with promises of new toys and dog treats— but, oh, he was such a stubborn dog! He didn’t come to any of them!”

“That sounds like Copper.” Nekane nodded with certainty. “How did you get him to come back then?”

“I had to explain that it was you who wanted him to come back to life, and then— *swoosh!*” Zorione’s hands swiftly moved from one side to another. “A great gust of wind came

and in circled around the grave, blowing all the candles out and put out the burning sage! My hair became all messy and the dirt blinded me for those few moments! When everything settled down, there was Copper who had dug himself out of his grave, crying like a newborn baby.”

“Oh, Copper! I missed you!” Nekane hugged Copper close to her chest. “I’m glad you came back. Ms. Hex, I knew you were a real necromancer!”

“Yeah, I guess you were right.” Zorione smiled, happy and satisfied with her job.

Perhaps this was her best job yet— regardless of whether it was the right thing to do or not depending on where one would stand on the ethics and morals of the situation, but something about bringing this Copper back to Nekane felt rewarding. She thought to enjoy the moment while it lasted before she dealt with a confused and possibly irritated Fabel later.