

# NIGHT VISIONS

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## The Vampire Cat of Nabeshima

by David Mcmasters



Kyoko heard the voices in the next room as they parted for the night. Lady O Toyo murmured something that caused Lord Nabeshima to emit a deep chuckle that carried through the screen. Kyoko to smile. She heard the sound of a screen being slid shut and waited for O Toyo to summon her again in preparation for sleep.

Long minutes passed and there was silence from the chamber beyond. She nearly tapped on the screen impatiently but caught herself. *She was no hedge samurai's daughter.* Though such informality was tolerated and even encouraged among the household, Kyoko herself had been raised in Kyoto near the Imperial court where practices were more formal. So she waited patiently for O Toyo.

Finally she began to get worried and finally she tapped hesitantly. There was a rustling from the chamber beyond and a murmur of sound. Kyoko frowned and tapped again. "O Toyo? May I enter?"

Again came the rustling and silence. Kyoko slid open the screen and cautiously looked in the sitting room. There was no one there and another screen was ajar, opening on the verandah beyond. "O Toyo," she said again a little louder.

Kyoko entered the room, sliding the screen shut behind her. Looking out the other screen, she saw shapes moving on the verandah. With horror, she thought she beheld a huge cat, a cat the size of a man, drag the still form of O Toyo over the edge of the verandah and disappear beneath. She drew back, confused and fearful. *Surely such things did not happen in the castle!* She was about to withdraw and summon the guards when O Toyo entered the sitting room.

"Is something wrong?" O Toyo asked.

"I came to get you. I thought we should go in and prepare for sleep," she said awkwardly.

O Toyo stared at her, her shadowed eyes demanding of Kyoko if she had seen anything. "I will call you later if I need you." She turned in clear dismissal, surveying the dark garden outside the room.

Kyoko stood a moment, hesitant, and then bowed and retreated.

It seemed that the strange occurrences of that night were the harbinger for more unusual events. The next few days seemed unreal. Lord Nabeshima became sick with a wasting illness that forced the normally active man to spend man hours in bed. His wife and councilors summoned doctors, but to no avail. A strange unease came over the household and the more superstitious retainers began to whisper that Lord Nabeshima's illness was of supernatural causes. Servants told stories of goblins and claimed to see an unnaturally large cat slipping from shadow to shadow.

Kyoko saw these changes and became worried. What particularly scared her were the changes that had come over O Toyo. Where once the two of them had been friends, the difference in their rank being scarcely any barrier, now O Toyo became haughty and aloof. At times, she would fly into a rage over some imagined slight. Once, she threw a lacquered box at Kyoko with such force that it left a bruise on her arm.

Finally, she asked permission to speak with the priest Ruiten, abbot of the Myo In Temple that lay close by the Daimyo's castle. He met her that evening in the small shrine outside the gate, accompanied by his scribe.

Immediately, he said, "Something is disturbing you." Peering at her closely, he said, "You have been close to the cause of the difficulties that are plaguing Lord Nabeshima's household."

She nodded. "I'm scared of the strange things that are happening."

"I have consulted with the Daimyo's councillors, and they are concerned. They asked me to take action, but I am unsure what I might do. All I can say is that the illness that has come over the Daimyo is not natural and bade them post guards about him in the event he was receiving nocturnal visitations from some evil spirit."

They spoke of the rumors that were circulating, particularly that of a large cat that had been seen around the castle. Kyoko then told the Abbot what she had witnessed on the verandah. While they were

speaking, one of the castle guardsman entered the shrine and made his ablutions at the well and went to pray before the shrine. He overheard Kyoko and Ruiten speaking and came over to where they sat.

"Excuse me," he said, bowing. "Do you truly think that there is something supernatural at work in the castle?"

"I've seen you here before, haven't I? Who are you?" Ruiten inquired.

"Yes. I am Ito Soda, loyal retainer of Lord Nabeshima. I have been coming here since he became ill in order to pray for his recovery."

"Every night?" Asked Kyoko.

"Yes. I wish that I could do more, but I am only a guardsman."

Ruiten became thoughtful. "Perhaps there is. You seem a brave and pious young man. Excuse us a moment." He drew Kyoko aside.

"I like the looks of this Ito Soda and I would like to request the Daimyo's councillors that he be allowed to stand guard with the other samurai. What do you think of this idea?"

Kyoko looked favorably on the guardsman, impressed with his strong, yet humble, bearing and his devotion to his Lord. "I think that is a wise decision."

They explained to Ito what they wished of him and obtained his agreement. Then, Kyoko pressed her dagger into his hand. "This dagger was my father's. Keep it about you and good luck, brave guardsman."

The next day, Ruiten went to Lord Nabeshima's chief councillor, Ryoho Zuken, and arranged that Ito might be allowed to stand guard with the other samurai the next night.

That evening, Ruiten presented Ito Soda to Ryoho and they went to stand guard over the Daimyo. The samurai took up their positions, settling themselves in their robes and talking softly among themselves as Lord Nabeshima fell asleep. The first part of the night passed in this way without incident.

It was past midnight when Ito felt the change come over the darkened room. He noticed a nearby samurai clutch his sword a little tighter for support as he slumped forward. Beside him, his companion's breathing became heavier and he began to blink. Ryoho yawned heavily and adjusted his robes. Gradually, the initial excitement that Ito had felt about being honored to guard his Lord began to wear off. He felt his eyelids grow heavier and began to feel like he was floating.

He shook his head to clear the cobwebs and yawned heavily. Stretching, he noticed many of the others seemed to be drowsing or close to sleep. Alarmed, he began to think about standing and pacing, but then thought that he might wake his Lord and disgrace himself thereby.

Looking around he beheld the normally vigilant samurai now leaning forward or reclining in sleep. The slight whispers of conversation had been replaced by the deeper sounds of sleep. He reached over and tugged on Ryoho's sleeve, thinking to awaken him. There was no response.

With that, he determined that the sleep that had apparently claimed all the warriors could only be magical and that the only way to stay awake was to take some more drastic measure. He pulled forth a sheet of oiled rice paper and spread it on the mat beneath him so that his blood would not stain it. Then, he pulled forth the stiletto that Kyoko had given him. He clenched his teeth and stabbed the dagger deep through the fleshy part of his thigh. He was barely able to repress a hiss of pain and the shock brought him abruptly awake.

Another hour passed, though he was able to keep the mysterious sleepiness at bay by the expedient of twisting the dagger in the wound he had made. Abruptly, he realized that someone else was in the room. A woman had slid open one of the screens and entered the room with quiet steps. She looked to the Daimyo's sleeping form and smiled an ominous smile. Looking around at his sleeping guards, she met Ito's gaze and her eyes narrowed.

She took a few steps in his direction and said, "I have not seen you around here. What is your name and how do you come to be here?"

He bowed from his sitting position and covered the knife with his robe. "I am Ito Soda. I am but a humble guardsman who has been give the privilege of guarding Lord Nabeshima. This is my first night at this duty."

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"You are very diligent in your duty. How is it that you come to be awake when all the rest of these men are asleep?" She gestured at the rest of the samurai who had not stirred during the conversation.

"It is nothing to boast of. I should be asleep myself, but I have chosen to keep awake just in case something curious should occur."

She noticed the oiled paper Ito had spread on the floor and the drops of blood that had fallen on it. "Is that blood I see there? And on the hem of your robe?"

"That too is nothing. Your pardon if I offend you in speaking frankly, but I felt sleep coming on and I stabbed myself with my dagger in order to keep myself awake."

She pretended amazement and shock. "You must be very brave or very foolish to have done such a thing. It must hurt terribly."

He laughed. "A scratch only. It is nothing to complain of and the least that I could do for my Lord. As the lowest of his retainers, it is my duty to lay down even my life for him."

She nodded in understanding and went over to the Daimyo and whispered, "My Lord? How do you feel this night?" He, being in a weakened state and in a deeper sleep than his guards, did not reply. She laid one hand light on his brow and made to bend over him. Glancing over at Ito, she saw he had fixed her with such a glare that she drew back. She adjusted the Daimyo's sleeping robes and would have bent over again, except that she saw Ito regarding her with a fierceness that made her hesitate. Several more times, she made as if to draw close to him, but Ito was unrelenting in his vigilance and she finally murmured a good night and left the chamber.

Dawn broke and the samurai began to stir. Ryoho was among the first to wake and lifted his head to see Ito looking around.

"Have you been awake the entire night, Ito? I fear I fell asleep."

Ito nodded and yawned broadly. "I have been awake, though I had to resort to extreme measures to do so." He indicated the wound from the dagger.

Ryoho seemed embarrassed. "Are you the only one who was awake the entire night? Some guards we are if we cannot even keep from sleeping the entire night. Even greater to be shamed by a guardsman like yourself."

"It is nothing. I know now there are unnatural influences at work. I must tell you that our Lord was visited by a woman last night while you were all sleeping. She seemed familiar with the Daimyo and I can only guess that it must have been O Toyo."

"Do you think it possible that she is responsible for our Lord's illness?"

"I had thought something might be amiss, but was unsure. I hesitate to accuse the Daimyo's lady, but I must admit my suspicions."

By this time the rest of the samurai had arisen, chagrined at having fallen asleep yet again and failed their duty. The Daimyo had arisen as well, looking remarkably better. He commented as much to Ryoho and the other councillors. Ito was dismissed to have his wound tended to and to get some sleep.

Ryoho spoke with Ruiten and Lord Nabeshima. The three of them agreed that O Toyo must be responsible for their Lord's malady. Accordingly, and without wasting time, they sent for Ito Soda.

He came at once and bowed before them.

"Ito Soda," said Lord Zuken. "We wish you to confront Lady O Toyo who, we believe, is in fact an evil creature masquerading as our Lord's dear wife."

"I would be honored. May I ask that you send eight of your samurai to accompany me?"

Ryoho nodded and commanded eight of his men to accompany Ito to O Toyo's chambers.

Ito crossed the garden while the samurai spread out behind him, swords and bows in hand. He mounted the steps to the verandah and slid aside the screen to O Toyo's quarters. He found himself face-to-face with O Toyo, her eyes blazing.

"What is the meaning of this! You will leave immediately."

Ito would not be dissuaded, for he had been commanded to perform this task. "Leave off," he said sternly. "I know the truth behind your nightly visits to the bedside of Lord Nabeshima."

"Get out!" She screamed.

Instead, Ito raised his sword and stepped into the room. She, in turn, grabbed up a halberd that hung on the wall and whirled to attack Ito. He deftly parried the blows she rained down on him and very nearly wounded her in return.

Seeing she could not win, she hurled herself forward. Not at Ito, who was braced for her attack, but past and into the verandah. There, she reverted to her true form of a fearsome demonic cat and leapt to the roof. Surprised, the samurai in the garden launched several arrows that went wide of their targets. Ito turned and rushed out to the garden, but was too late to prevent the goblin cat from making good its escape.

For his part, Ito was rewarded with land and title. While Lord Nabeshima never did marry again, Ito married Kyoko and they live a long and happy life together. Rumors of a vampire cat preying on travelers on the northern moors persisted for a number of years until a hero from Edo tracked it down and put an end to its evil once and for all.



THE CAT OF NABESHIMA