

# The Tale of Kaguya-hime: Selenite Steel

## Kurokawa Taizen



The child now named Kaguya-hime grew prodigiously in mind, body, and spirit within the span of months. Much of the gold the old bamboo cutter found in the bamboo forest went to affording his family a life of comfort, but also funded his adopted daughter's voracious thirst for new knowledge and skills. Neither he nor his wife could divine her reasons, but were proud to raise such a spirited and driven child who mastered everything from archery to falconry, from blacksmithing to flower-arranging, and read widely down to the most esoteric of texts.

The old bamboo cutter tried his best to keep all distractions and suitors away from Kaguya-hime as her beauty blossomed and all of manner of people took more and more notice. This lasted until, one day, there were five men of such status that he could not dismiss them without severe consequence.

They were nobles and lords of varying age, of old family lines, of esteemed positions, of deep wealth. All asked for Kaguya-hime's hand in marriage. Uninterested and unamused, she imposed a task for each man and agreed to marry only upon successful completion of such. One was bring her stone begging bowl used by the Buddha; the second, a jeweled branch from Horai island; the third, the hide of a fire-rat; the fourth, a colored jewel from a dragon's neck; and for the last, the cowry shell treasure of the swallows. Each and every man balked at such impossible requests but they obliged her fantasies and boasted to return in smug triumph.

When the stone begging bowl was brought to her, Kaguya-hime identified it as a fake when it lacked the humble radiance of the genuine article.

She discarded the jeweled branch of Horai after appraising it as something crafted; the gold branch and gem blooms and leaves as something entirely assembled by human hands.

The hide of fire-rat brought before her burnt to ash whereas the genuine article would be unscathed by any flame.

The dragon scale never manifested as the noble assigned to it tried to voyage for a sea dragon but abandoned the journey after the onset of heavy and terrible storms.

A messenger informed her of the final noble perishing in a fall after attempting to reach into a cliff-side swallow's nest.

After the conclusion of each task, the Emperor of Japan paid an inquiring visit and fell in love upon sighting Kaguya-hime's captivating visage. He too asked her to marry him. She declined directly instead of offering any of the impossible tasks. She said it would be unbecoming for a supreme authority of the land to marry someone who did not originate from it. He left discouraged but they stayed in cordial contact through letters where she conversed pleasantly, offered advising remarks, and rebuffed the occasional requests to reconsider marriage.

Kaguya-hime herself was disappointed in all affairs. Time was running ever short. She had knowledge but no way to verify it, skills but no manner to apply them, and resources but no opportunity to delegate them. Five men of wealth and power she tasked and they failed each to the one

to acquire what was necessary. She thought them either insufficiently driven or sufficiently incapable. They were, however, motivated enough to spread word of her five requests and where there was once a flood of suitors flocking to her door, was now a barren drought. If this continued, her ultimate fate was as unacceptable as it was inevitable.

One day, the news of spirited commotion in the city caught her intrigue. Talk circulated of a foreigner who had improvised a makeshift arena and welcome challenges from all who passed by. He had been there for days as his thirst for fight had yet to be sated and local authorities proved powerless to overcome him. Kaguya-hime considered this and left her home to evaluate the man for herself.

His hair was the color of deep cinnabar. His eyes were the vibrant green of a venerable forest. His stature fair, straight, and tall. His compact musculature shifted like a living work of art as he fought man after man in an unarmed spectacle of brutal elegance. By the time his last opponent limped away, Kaguya-hime realized her eyes had lingered long indeed. Perhaps the foreigner could succeed where many have failed and she could stand take more initiative in seeking capability. She parted the crowd aside and stood before him. To his credit, he was neither dismissive nor patronizing of her approach, only quirked an eyebrow in clear curiosity and asked, in a tongue more scholarly than barbarian, if she truly intended to engage him in her fine robes.

Kaguya-hime shook her head. While she was exceedingly confident, she had a greater challenge in mind. She declared all five of her requests to a single man: the Buddha's stone begging bowl, a jeweled branch from Horai island, the hide of a fire-rat, a colored jewel from a dragon's neck, and the cowry shell treasure of the swallows. The foreigner laughed heartedly in good nature and agreed those were very formidable challenges to contest individually, if not all at once. She held out her hand to grasp and the moment he did so, pulled him intimately close.

She stressed she could only wait four more years and he was to return with everything or not return at all. Surprised and flustered at the clear need in her voice, the foreigner was at a loss of words, but eventually nodded after a few moments pause. Her hand lingered as Kaguya-hime promised him all she owned to his success and released him. As the foreigner made to pack his things, she swiftly returned home.

For three years, Kaguya-hime prepared, probed, and practiced with a quiet fervor and marked urgency that greatly worried her adoptive parents. When they asked what was wrong, she revealed to them the full truth of the matter.

She hailed from the Moonlit Capital above, exiled from Tsuki no Miyako as punishment for her rebellion. They thought to make her suffer on the base earth; to court impurity, to form material attachments, to love and then know loss. All the gold found in the bamboo forest was a spiteful offering toward an easy, comfortable life that was trivial to spirit away in a single, full moon night. She would be returned to her people, by force if need be. They told her exactly how they would shroud her in the feathered cloak and how she would be completely helpless as it rendered her barren of memory, affection, and fight. Kaguya-hime despaired because she could only speculate how to avert her fate, but possessed one opportunity for decisive action. She did not yet know if her any of preparations would bear fruit; whether she wasted her passing span on the earth she had grown so fond of.

The old bamboo cutter and his wife passed glances at each other before gently scolding their child for the first time in their lives. She brought them the full joy of raising a wonderful daughter to adulthood, something they would have never experienced otherwise. They were much too old to join in conflict, but they could at least support her and make the best use of their remaining time together.

Relieved and grateful, Kaguya-hime only asked for her parents to do as they always have and apologized for having them needlessly fret. She told them to watch for news and sighting of a flame-hair foreigner.

Hope was not a plan, but much hinged on it nonetheless.

Six months later, the foreigner arrived at her gate. He was bruised, battered, bloodied, and broken with a pronounced limp and dangling arm, but sported an unyielding grin. Kaguya-hime hurriedly relieved him of an unscathed cloth bag. The contents within clattered hopefully as she caught him in her arms soon after. She called for her parents to help him to bed and dress his wounds. They were more than willing to help as well as fuss over someone who had so piqued their daughter's interest.

She all but ran to her workshop and dared not open the bag until she safely secured herself within. With bated breath and unfettered anticipation, Kaguya-hime took each individual item for appraisal.

The unglazed and simple bowl looked unassuming even as it emitted a faint outline of golden light, thus confirming it to be the Buddha's Stone Begging Bowl. Merely holding it filled her with a soothing tranquility rare in her life.

There was an impossible wood grain and semblance of golden bark on the Jeweled Branch of Horai that looked to be purely grown. The gem leaves and jeweled flowers sprouted naturally from it in dazzling, contradictory beauty.

The Fire Rat Hide failed to burn, even in the fires of her forge, the fur of it seemed to dance and come alive in the intense heat. When pulled out for closer inspection, it was only slightly warm to the touch.

Cleaned of old blood and clinging strands of flesh, she could enclose the Dragon's Colored Jewel in the palm of her hand. It shimmered like pearl in five colors, was sharp like obsidian, and weighed heavily as pure lead.

There was only one way to test the Swallow's Treasure because it appeared a cowry shell like any other. She strung it up on a tough cord where it dangled long enough to be hidden under clothing and headed to where the foreigner was staying.

Her parents smiled at her knowingly and expressed their heartfelt approvals as she passed them by in good cheer. Kneeling by his bedside, she brought the cowry shell to her lips and kissed it tenderly before securing it around the foreigner's neck.

The effect was almost immediate. He sat up like a man unburdened by fatigue and unheeded by his bandaged wounds and hurts. He spoke, neither to boast of his accomplishments or regale her of his perilous journey, only to ask if he completed her challenge in full.

More hopeful than she ever was, her response was an emphatic “yes” as she began to hurriedly confess the information he was owed and the greater conflict he was now involved in. Particularly about how he had tied his fate to hers and how, in success or failure, retaliation on them would be forthcoming. None of which deterred him. To the contrary, she could only perceive the deep determination dwelling in the dark green depths of his eyes. He asked if she wanted further help and Kaguya-hime firmly pushed him back down to bed with a gentle hand.

She bade him to rest and then search for a remote area where he could freely engage any foe by the next full moon of the summer. And then, when all was said and done, he could rely on her to find him in the aftermath.

The Emperor was ignorant of her plight until he wrote to ask about the unusual activity of craftsmen, materials, supplies, and the sporadic appropriation of tanegashima firearms in her region. Upon disclosing everything to him, he promised her a small force of trained men. She appreciated the spirit of the gesture, though they would not be of much help.

On the advent of the terrible night, Kaguya-hime stared balefully at the summer’s full moon as a small contingent of the Emperor’s men filed into the courtyard of her home. She wore layer upon layer of robes despite the balmy air and kept a long, cloth-swathed bundle at her side as she sat immobile while her parents welcomed them.

Kaguya-hime expressed regrets for being too preoccupied to carry on as a proper host, but she could at least offer them cool refreshment as salve against the stifling summer heat. She motioned to a heavy clay vessel on which a wooden ladle sat. The soldiers carried a strong thirst from their hurried march and as such, none questioned the soft, golden light suffusing the chilled water or the peculiar sight of a stone bowl resting at the bottom. Each man took a deep draught of water and found their restlessness quelled, tranquility nourished, and focus sharpened. Once the vessel was emptied, Kaguya-hime retrieved the Buddha’s Stone Begging Bowl and handed it off to her parents for safekeeping, for though the Buddha may not truly desire, he may appreciate it accounted for.

She returned to gazing at the moon above and everyone followed in unspoken anticipation. No more a poetic symbol than a harsh portent of conflict, the lunar body radiated a foreboding light.

Then, in the span of a moonbeam, the Lunarian host descended. Superficially human in appearance but only just, they were accompanied by a cold, purging light that bathed the courtyard in malefic and inhuman purity. But, rather than be blinded or disoriented, the human soldiers, whose wills were fortified by the Buddha’s Stone Begging Bowl, stood fast and pressed forward on the attack. Their spears found ample purchase, but their perseverance more perturbed the Lunarians who expected no resistance in any involved. Silver pool beneath their fine robes and the emissaries of Tsuki no Miyako were slow to conflict. Four started to limp before the remaining host dismissively swept the Emperor’s men aside and rushed at Kaguya-hime.

Giving no ground, she spun her cloth bundle and her naginata lashed out from its confinement in circular, sweeping cuts that kept them at bay. Its wooden haft was reinforced with stiff, golden bark and the cut, jeweled flowers and leaves studding its steel edge crashed and shattered mercilessly on the encroaching Lunarians.

One slipped past in the flood of numbers and entrapped her in the dreaded feather robe. Kaguya-hime bit down a scream as hundreds of quills bore through her clothing. Before they even touched her skin, she could feel her compassion for humanity, her rage at the moon, her gratitude toward her parents, and her deepening love...ravaged, torn, and stripped asunder to render only the sterile cold and alien mind of a proper Lunarian. Then, the quills finally pierced the last layer she wore and the Fire Rat Hide reacted in great violence. Her entire form became flame as the hide expelled all of its stored fire at once and turned all other coverings to ash.

The offender who threw the feather cloak on her only held dull surprise on his face before his body firmly held her weapon. The other Lunarians were similarly befuddled and were cut down, if with greater effort, by the Emperor's men for their inattention.

Unconcerned with neither the bodies littering the courtyard or the gaping stares at her lack of modesty, Kaguya-hime revealed the tanegashima stored underneath the now tepid Fire Rat robes. She checked the condition of the arquebus and was satisfied it remained functional. Again, she reached beneath her single robe and again ignored the stares to retrieve the hayagao strapped to her leg. In a practiced sequence, she tore the paper seal of the bamboo cartridge, fixed it to the end of her gun, tipped in a larger than usual amount of gun powder, and inserted a rammer through the other end to firmly pack in the precious, multicolored bullet and its wadding. With the loading done, she removed the device and purposefully dropped it on the Lunarian corpse at her feet.

No sooner than she finished, a keening, hollow rattle rippled through the night air and the moon itself become enshrouded in eerie, blue shadow. The Emperor's men caught sight of it first and words failed them at the wholly maddening, foreign thing leisurely descending as if it were the whole of the night sky. They stood firm, though their knees trembled, and raised their spears, though their hands shook.

Perhaps the Lunarians were not so arrogant as to only send a small embassy to coerce her, but their greatest and continuing mistake was permitting her time; five or so years of planning, procuring, and practice. Kaguya-hime steadied the tanegashima, aimed at an expansive target she could only miss with trying, and waited.

The presence smothered the entirety of her home and the land around. The Emperor's men buckled as if under a crushing, intangible weight and fearfully stabbed upwards in vain. A ropy, barren face fixed unerringly at her like a grotesque bloodhound. She pulled the trigger and her firearm violently detonated into wooden and metal shrapnel.

A brilliant, 5-color bullet lanced toward the moon and seared a preternaturally straight trail of dancing dragonfire into the night sky.

The moon became bright once more, but not ominously so. The wounded presence retreated, though not completely defeated. The Emperor's men looked at one another in disbelieving relief and then at her with plain concern. Kaguya-hime gave them a dismissive nod as she released the remains of her gun from charred hands. While the fire rat robe insulated her body from the explosive heat, it did less against the physical and total fragmentation of her weapon. Little shards of wood and metal had

carved fine paths across her arms with particular attention to her face where she once held it close. Fortunately, her eyes were spared, but there was no doubt scars would forever remain.

The battle over and done with, she finally permitted herself to sit down in the calm. The Emperor's men milled around her as they tended their wounds and gave one another brittle reassurances of their victory over an unknown force. Her elderly parents shuffled out and she allowed them to fuss over her injuries and state of undress.

Kaguya-hime waved one of the Emperor's men over, taking the first that responded to her summons. While her father draped her in a rugged traveling robe, her mother handed her a small vial of silvered liquid and letter prepared days before. These items she passed over and explained that the letter and Elixir of Immortality were for the Emperor and were his to accept however he liked. She further informed him that the soldier along with everyone else could recuperate for as long as needed before promptly dismissing him. Though farewells and wealth were already spoken of and settled, she hugged both of her parents for the last time, firmly spoke of her gratitude, and implored them to their lives in comfort. Then, she was out of the gates with her eyes set on the final loose end to her liberation.

There was much storming beneath the stern visage of the Emperor as he pored over Kaguya-hime's final correspondence. He was sad, bitter, resigned, all at once for persisting over a woman who made her feelings very clear. His regrets were many, however, much like the woman at the center of it all, there was no holding onto them in the face of his responsibilities as the Emperor of Japan. He admittedly did not believe the entirety of Kaguya-hime's story and thought little of sending men as a goodwill gesture until they reported back to him, shaken in spirit and broken in body.

The land was no stranger to all manner of beasts, spirits, and youkai, but the audacity of alien existences to come and go as they please did not sit well with him. They were unprepared, but they were at least forewarned. He asked a servant for the mountain closest to the heavens to which he was offered the Great Mountain of Suruga Province. The Emperor ordered the letter and Elixir of Immortality to be burned at the mountain's summit. He had no desire to bear the duty of the Chrysanthemum Throne forever nor distance himself in inhumanity from his people. He hoped the smoke would reach to the moon as a reminder of the Lunarian's failed incursion and a warning that the people of Japan would abide their behavior no longer.

Heedless of obstacle or distance, Kaguya-hime unerringly walked toward the pulling sensation of the Swallow's Cowry Shell. It was ever on the horizon, but the tugging always moved this way and that in quickened paces. She smiled at the thought of the red-haired foreigner still alive and fighting. Her heart stopped when the sensation stilled and remained so for distressingly long. She ran as if riding upon the wind.

Approaching a dark thicket of bamboo, Kaguya-hime finally slowed her stride as the night air became deathly still of insects and animals. The deeper she walked, the more the bamboo curiously bent toward one direction. Occasionally, there was ominous creaking and cracking as the long stalks flexed in shuddering unison. Falls of silvery, elongated grains of dust blanketed the forest floor like dry snow.

She found the foreigner lying serenely at the center of it all, wounded as she was used to seeing him, but definitely alive and undisturbed beneath unintentional cover formed by the draping corpse of

of the Moon Entity and the hundreds of bamboo spears skewering through in every part of its disintegrating body, save for the left side of its chest where no flesh remained, only a crudely torn void rimmed by smoldering edges. Kaguya-hime smiled viciously at the sight of it.

One hand clasped around the Swallow's Treasure, he attempted to sit up at her approach, but Kaguya-hime would have none of it and firmly pushed him back down before following through with the full weight of her entire body. She met no resistance given his recent battle and puzzlement of the circumstances at hand.

It was a wonderful night to be truly unburdened and she had little qualms in spending it quietly with the man she appraised rightly and who brought it all within her grasp. She permitted the fatigue of a long and extended journey to overtake her and laid comfortably on his wiry form. One night of undisturbed calm was hardly a bad thing before she informed him the true consequences of assisting her and conferring her fullest appreciation for the eternity of their shared, unfettered future.