

Genzo looked round in **astonishment** and then realised that the light was pouring from the very first shoot he had cut. The old man dropped his axe and peeped into the severed stump and there, to his amazement, sitting **contentedly** in the hollow stem, was the prettiest little girl he had ever seen. Girl, he called her, but she was actually a **miniature** human being, only a few centimetres high but perfect in every **respect**.

She smiled up at Genzo, light radiating from her as he stooped to lift the little creature.



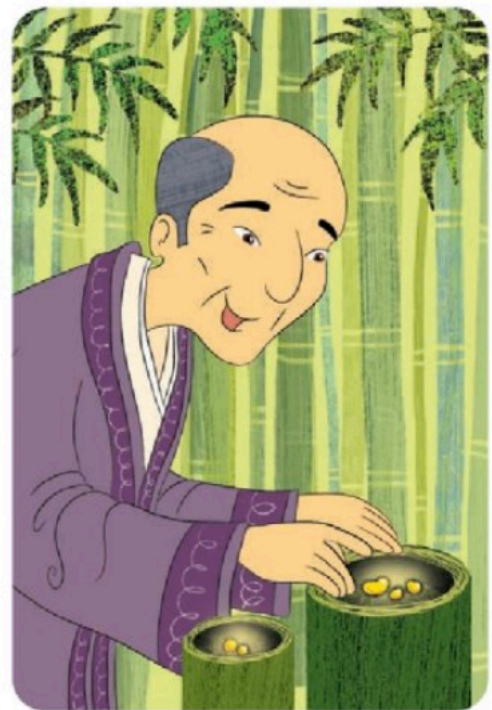
‘The gods must have sent you to be our child for it was in a bamboo that I, a poor bamboo cutter, found you.’ And Genzo bowed low to show his thanks.

His wife could hardly believe her eyes when her husband hurried home before midday, but her astonishment was even greater when he opened his cupped hands and revealed the tiny little child.

‘Can we keep her? Can we keep her? Please say we can!’

They were now an **extremely** happy old couple and were made even more so when Genzo-san began to find little lumps of pure gold every now and then. These were always inside the hollow stems of the bamboo he cut down, not in every one by any means but about once a week he would see the gleam of gold and excitedly fish out yet another nugget. **Occasionally** he would find a precious stone in the same hiding places, a diamond, a ruby, a sapphire, and even a **flawless** pearl or two.

By degrees the happy old couple became quite rich so that they were able to move to a larger and finer house. It was here that they named their child Kaguyahime, a Japanese name **translated** as ‘The Shining Princess’. She was a princess who was growing **rapidly**,



astonishingly so, for in only three months she had **progressed** from a tiny doll-like creature into a fully-grown young lady of **surpassing** beauty. In a darkened room she glowed with a soft **radiance** so that the old couple addressed her as Princess Moonlight. All those lucky enough to be allowed to see her were dazzled by her loveliness and could hardly wait to spread the tale of what they had seen.



Before long her fame was known in far off Kyoto and even in the outer islands of Japan, and suitors for her hand in marriage came knocking and bowing and pleading for a chance to see the Shining Princess. All were refused **permission** except for three knights whom Princess Moonlight had secretly selected from the crowd of suitors who jostled for places in the garden beneath her window. With all the rest **dismissed** each of the three was allowed to enter the lower room for a brief glimpse of their bride-to-be, only to be left speechless at her glowing **radiance**.



'If you are to win my hand,' she told each of them in turn, 'you must complete the task I set you.'



She asked the first knight to bring her back a branch of the wonderful tree which grew on the summit of Mount Horai in the far distant Eastern Sea. The roots of this tree were of silver, the trunk of gold and its branches bore diamonds in the shape of flowers. The knight bowed low and withdrew, still unable to speak a word.



The second knight she asked to bring her back from China the skin of the fire-rat. This **extremely** rare, but **ferocious** animal always attacked on sight and its bite was lethal. It also had the magical power of being completely **immune** to flames and heat and could walk through the hottest fire without harm. The second knight bowed low and withdrew in silence.

Princess Moonlight asked the third knight to search for the dragon that carried a precious stone **embedded** in the centre of its scaly head, a stone that shone with five **separate** colours and which could make you **invisible** by merely stroking it. So the third knight made his bow and withdrew.

Each of the three went their separate ways and, having seen her beauty for themselves, each was **determined** to win the hand of the Shining Princess.

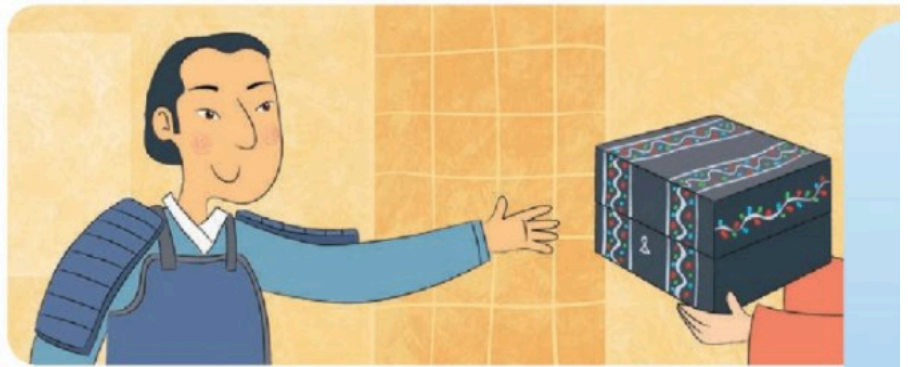
However, all three knew that the tasks they had been set were quite beyond their powers so each in turn set about devising a scheme that would trick the Princess into thinking they had succeeded.



The first knight did indeed set out for Mount Horai, but having heard that its slopes were the haunt of giant **serpents** and that the tree itself was guarded by fire-breathing dragons he turned aside to the town of Yamaguchi. It was a city famous for its **silversmiths** and the first knight sought out

the very best and promised them much gold if they could copy exactly a branch of the wonderful tree which grew on the **summit** of Mount Horai. The jewellers set to work and for a whole year they used their skills until they finished the golden branch with its diamonds in the shape of flowers. The knight paid them well and set off back to the home of the Shining Princess with his gift carefully **protected** in a silk-lined box of the finest split bamboo.

Meanwhile, the second knight had sailed for China in quest of the **vicious** fire-rat, only to be told that the last six warriors who had **attempted** to catch it had each been bitten to death and their bodies consumed in flames. Why should he take such a risk, he asked himself, when a cunning Chinese magician could make a skin so like that of the fire-rat that no one in the world could tell the **difference**?



He searched for many months before finding a magician willing to **undertake** the task and much gold changed hands before the skin was finally **produced**. Well satisfied, the second knight set off back to Japan with his precious gift laid in a lacquered box **adorned** with silver and precious stones.



The third knight had set off in search of the dragon which carried a **fabulous** ruby embedded in the centre of its scaly head, but as he **approached** the cave in which it lived he came upon stacks of blackened skulls and other human bones.

As he paused in fear there came a roar from the cave and a puff of smoke and flame so that he **instantly** turned his horse's head and galloped at full speed away across the plains. Even so he felt a whiff of heat at his back, but this caused his horse to gallop even faster and thus saved his life.

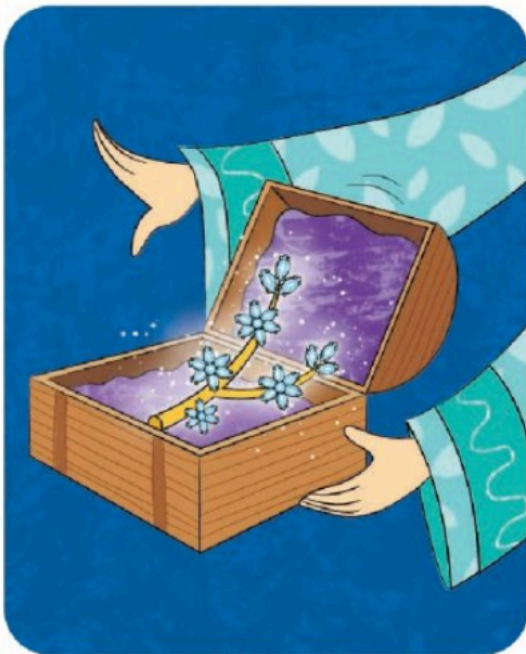
Like the first two knights, he now sought out a **skilful** jeweller and set him the task of exactly **imitating** the precious stone set in the dragon's head, a type of ruby which shone with five separate colours



and had magical powers. In a year the stone was delivered to him at the cost of much gold, and the third knight, too, set off for the home of the Shining Princess.



When the first knight arrived at the home of the Shining Princess he immediately asked old Genzo and his wife to take the bamboo box and its precious contents to their lovely daughter now that he had **completed** his task successfully. The old couple hurried to the Princess and laid the box at her feet, **retiring** to kneel at the edge of the room while she undid the silken ribbons. When she took out the golden branch with its glittering flowers they gasped with wonder, only to fall silent as they saw her frown.



'A **bough** from the tree on Mount Horai is warm and gentle to the touch, magically warm from the fires in the mountain's heart. But this **imitation** I hold in my hand is cold and metallic. Take the false thing away!' And the Shining Princess fluttered her fan in anger.

When Genzo handed back the golden bough to the knight and told him he was dismissed the warrior stamped his foot in rage and crashed the precious object to the floor. He turned his horse's head towards the mountains and was never seen in Genzo's **province** again. The Princess gave orders that the gold and jewels were to be sold and the money given to the poor people of the district. They ever afterwards blessed her name.

Next day the second knight arrived and handed over the **lacquer** box containing the skin of the fire-rat. The Princess opened the box, undid the silken **wrappings** and took out the skin and **examined** it carefully.

'It looks and feels just like a skin of a fire-rat, but there is one sure test I must make.'

She carried the skin over to the glowing brazier and dropped it on the hottest part of the fire. Within seconds the skin **shrivelled** and emitted an acrid black smoke, then suddenly burst into flames.

'Again a false object has been brought to me. Even the fiercest flame could not singe a single hair of a fire-rat. Send that **dishonest** knight away!' And once again the Shining Princess fluttered her fan in anger.

When the warrior was told the news he turned his horse's head towards the mountains and galloped away and that was the end of him.

The third knight arrived a day later and handed over the enamel box containing the jewel, telling Genzo that he had **personally slain** the dragon and then prised the ruby from its bony head. The old man hurried away and handed the Princess the box. At first she seemed quite **impressed** with the precious stone, turning it in her hand so that it changed into five beautiful colours each catching the light with glowing rays.

'Perhaps this third knight is a true knight,' said the Princess, 'but I must give the stone its final test.' She started to stroke the ruby, then turned to the old couple and asked them if they could still see her.

'Of course we can, Princess Moonlight.'

'Then once again they have tried to trick me. The real dragon stone would have made me invisible.

Take the **miserable** thing away!'

So with the third knight banished from her sight Princess Moonlight now had no suitors for her hand and she told the old couple that this pleased her rather than made her sad.

'I will always remain a single girl so I can live with you until my time here on earth is up.'



From *The Shining Princess and other Japanese Legends*
by Eric Quayle and Michael Foreman.