The Princess and the Butterfly

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THE PRINCESS AND THE BUTTERFLY

Once upon a time there was a tiny iridescent butterfly who, tired of being just a butterfly and too familiar with the flowers that populated her world, had begun taking all of the forest for granted. Wedged between the furry stamen and the softness of a balooah's fragrant petals, she'd sleep the sleep of the unhappy. It was, sadly, how things stood until the one misty morning that saw her alight in search of adventure and genuine happiness.

The little butterfly travelled day and night, many days and many nights until, squinting into the sinking sun, she saw a flying horse. Its coat was glistening black. Golden bolts of lightning shot out of its front hooves.

Almost blinded by the sight but antennae twitching in excitement, the little butterfly was mesmerized by the creature's glorious mane. Made of silver moon threads, it radiated pure beauty. Two large wings were wrapped tightly over his flanks like a shimmery armor.

Careful to not collide into her, the moon horse, for the apparition was indeed a moon horse, glided friskily towards the butterfly. "Look here, little butterfly," the creature spoke. "See that dark spec of land way, way down there?" Extending a powerful foreleg, the moon horse pointed a hoof towards the precise spot where the horizon becomes the sky. "See it?" The little butterfly nodded. "It's an island," explained the moon horse, "and on that island is a great, old castle. And inside that great, old castle lives Sharu." As if its words should have triggered some sort of appreciative exclamation, the moon horse looked expectantly at the little butterfly who twitched her thread-thin antennae above her tiny black forehead. "Princess Sharu, little butterfly," the moon horse added grandly.

“Mmmm …” The little butterfly nodded, unsure as to what more she should say, seeing as the name meant absolutely nothing to her. Besides, as a butterfly, as a somewhat insignificant insect, she’d never been introduced to any princess. Not to the one they called Sharu, not to any other.

“Ah … the ignorance of the insular,” bemoaned the moon horse. “Princess Sharu, I’ll have you know, is the most beautiful princess anyone of us has ever seen.”

“Oh.”

“You can say that again.” The moon horse shook its head and the sliver moon-threads trapped in its mane shimmered over its elegant neck like liquid ice. “Princess Sharu is as beautiful as a golden dawn is beautiful. She’s as beautiful as the rain bow that holds all our hopes.”

“Oh!” the little butterfly quipped again.

“The problem … because there is always a problem when it comes to princesses … is that Princess Sharu is lonely.” The moon horse paused once again meaningfully.

The little butterfly’s wings missed a beat. If she knew anything at all, she knew the meaning of the word ‘lonely’. “Lonely, as in all alone in her heart?”

“All alone in her heart, yes, though she’s not alone-*alone*, if you know what I mean.”

The little butterfly crinkled her forehead. She didn’t know what to make of the horse’s cryptic comment. “Oh!” she said, just to say something.

“You don’t get it, do you?”

“Uh … no.” The little butterfly flapped her wings faster to distract the moon horse from the blush of embarrassment that had begun a slow crawl up to the tips of her antennae.

“Magic Man … he lives there, too. Not in the great old castle, but in the forest. He loves Princess Sharu −”

“That figures!” the little butterfly mumbled. This Sharu can’t be that lonely, then. Not lonely like me, is what the little butterfly almost blurted. Not if she’s got a *magic* man at her feet and−

“You’re missing the point here, little one. It’s not a magic *man* who just happens to live over there. It’s Magic Man. Capital M. Twice. Get it?” The horse whinnied enthusiastically and, momentarily forgetting that butterflies are too little to have a thinking brain able to process nuances, it added, “The problem, for the Princess, does not lie in the Magic part of the name but in the other word that makes it a whole.” Far too cryptic for the little butterfly. Besides, having to focus all her energy on stand-still flapping, she was getting tired. Yet, she desperately wanted to stay abreast of the horse’s powerful withers.

“Never mind,” grumbled the moon horse. “What you don’t get now, you’ll figure out later. All you need to do, little butterfly, is fly over there. That’s if your butterfly wings can carry you that far.” The little butterfly’s flutter became hesitant. “Well, you’re lonely, too, aren’t you?” One antenna above the little butterfly’s forehead twisted itself around the other. “Oh, for chrissakes,” glowered the moon horse. “Get a grip! Fly to the island. Reach the Princess’s forest. If worse comes to worst, at the very least, you will find trees and ferns and moss and brooks and what every butterfly dreams of - a multitude of lush and splendid flowers that will let you nibble at them till you drop.”

“Oh!” Briefly, the little butterfly thought of sweet nectar.

The sky was fading into dusk and clouds of shimmery darkness had begun mushrooming ahead of them.

“Stretch those wings, little butterfly. Find those flowers. Suck their stamens. Tease their heart, one petal at a time.” The moon horse chuckled, “If I were you, I wouldn’t stop until I found the white flower, the one of the thousand petals.”

The moon horse pranced cockily. Sparks of silver burst from its hooves. “Come, I’ll guide you to the other side of those dark clouds ahead." Careful to keep her frail wings pinned back against her body, and her thread-thin antennae tucked in, the little butterfly perched herself atop the moon horse’s mighty forehead.

The sea below became blurry. Made suddenly dizzy by the soaring heights through which the moon horse was taking her, the little butterfly closed her eyes. Like a stealth galleon of dark coal, the moon horse sailed straight through one cloud and straight through the next and again and again, oblivious to their terrifying rumbling and grumbling. Again and again, until a massive shudder almost toppled the butterfly off her perch. The sea was rushing up to them.

The moon horse crashed against the sea in a tangle of wings and hooves. The sea’s skin is hard, very hard and yet, the moon horse broke through it, releasing much softer but deadly arcs of water that would have drowned the little butterfly down as surely as a monsoon rain can drown ox and cart. Thrashing heavily to keep its nostrils from filling up with sea water, the horse spluttered. “Fly, butterfly! Fly now!” Again it shouted, “You must not get wet, butterfly. You will lose your iridescent coat to the sea. Fly! Fly to the Princess! "

The little butterfly spread her wings wide. “No way! I’m not leaving you.” Her antennae bristled. She had to find a way to rescue the moon horse who, though its hooves clawed at the waves, was being dragged below the surface by the deadly spread of her water-logged wings. The mighty moon horse was clearly fighting for its life.

Out of desperation, the little butterfly called out, “Hey, you! Magic Man! If you’re down there! It’s you I’m calling! If you can hear me, please save the moon horse. She’s my friend but the sea’s got her trapped! Magic Man? Can you hear me?”

The thunder of the waves answered the butterfly's cry as the sea crested over the moon horse. The butterfly flapped her wings faster and faster, faster than a hummingbird. Beautiful wings they were, dotted with sunflower gold and turquoise blue, but totally useless they were when it came to rescuing a drowning moon house. Her antennae had become all twisted with fear when, suddenly, a school of glistening flying fish jumped up from the threatening depth of the sea to circle the moon horse's head. Then up, up and up, right up to the moon, they lifted her.

Dried instantly by the huge swishing of air displaced, the moon horse pranced and whinnied in farewell, though it did not strike its hooves to release more thunderbolts. Dismayed, the little butterfly watched the moon horse, her only friend, disappear around the other side of the moon.

"Uh …" she began, unsure as to what she needed to say. "Uh … hey … Magic Man, uh ... cool trick what you've just done. What I mean is … if it's you who's just helped the moon horse … thank you!" the little butterfly finally shouted, hoping Magic Man, no doubt the magician who had sent the fish that had rescued her moon horse, was still within earshot.

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The night sky grew even darker and quickly cocooned the little butterfly in a blanket of thick and very dark but very soft velvet. In spite of that softness all around her, the mere thought of being all alone in a strange forest so far away from her own, for the first time ever, made her shiver with apprehension.

And so she landed on the leaf of a giant lilibu as softly as she could in spite of her utter weariness. And there she curled up to sleep.

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Sleep she did until, parted by a mighty breath, the lilibu's branches swayed and leaves rustled. "Go to the castle!" said a voice. The little butterfly alighted from the leaves. "Go to the castle. Now!" The hollow voice ricocheted against the tree trunks.

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As soon as the little butterfly fluttered through an opening in the crossed panes set deeply into the thick walls of the gloomy castle, she saw the princess. More than that, the little butterfly was awed by Princess Sharu's beauty, by the diamond-shaped eyes, the color of the moonstone that, oddly, illuminated her from within. The little butterfly noted how her hair, wild and unbridled, jumped about her face with such glee that it rivalled the flames' joyous dance in the cavernous hearth behind her.

Right there and then, it happened - the little butterfly fell in love with princess Sharu. But we all know - don't we - that butterflies cannot love all that much, what with their heart being so tiny!

The little butterfly flew back into the woods, darting in and out of the lightning bolts that had begun piercing the forest through and through. Here, there and everywhere they cracked, ripping through the thick canopy of trees.

In the agony of her heart about to burst, the little butterfly begged out loud, "Magic Man? If you can hear me … Please...my butterfly heart is so full of love for Princess Sharu, I can hardly fly! My heart has become too heavy for my frail wings. They can't lift me any higher and not any further. I beg you! Change me into a human being … now, or I shall die. "

Buffeting the little butterfly against leaves, bruising her delicate wings, the storm hissed, thundered and tore through the woods till it had emptied itself of all the wind it had carried.

Grumpily, the Magic Man rose from his moss-covered bedding. "You might be tiny, Butterfly, but you sure make a lot of noise. I will help you, but only one last time."

The little butterfly felt herself lifted high up, way up in the air before being dropped in between the gnarled roots of an ancient tree.

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Princess Sharu detached herself from the gloomy mass of the castle. Something in the strange silence that followed the storm, something in the evening air had compelled her to take a walk deep into the forest and there she all but stumbled over the shape of a woman, visibly a very young one, curled up on the emerald softness of moss that padded the gnarled roots of an ancient tree.

Mesmerized by the tangle of moon-bleached curls and the soft sheen of ebony that made the youthful body shimmer under diaphanous swirls of sunflower yellow and turquoise blue, Sharu watched over the sleeping beauty's rest until, slowly, the stranger opened her eyes. As she half-rose, her gaze swept over Princess Sharu.

Sharu broke the silence. "You are a princess from a foreign land for, oh young one, you are far too beautiful to be from this land. What is your name, Oh delicious being?"

The stranger’s skin had the softness of a petal when the flower, emerging from her green chamber, offers herself to the first dawn. But, feathery, her eyebrows knotted themselves in puzzlement as words, odd words crowded behind her lips to spill into the air.

“If you can guess my name before the owl cries out for the third time,” she said, “you will have earned the right to take me into your castle and into your arms. There, while many moons come to pass, we shall live forever happy. Never lonely.”

Princess Sharu, spurred on by such an unusual dare, blurted out the most beautiful names she could think of. “Johandra? Alexis? Rackanne? No?” eyebrows tight, she peered into the young girl’s face. “No,” she confirmed for herself. “The name given to you by the spirit of the cosmos is, no doubt, the most beautiful name this forest will ever hear. So it has got to be a

name as fresh and radiant, as soft and beautiful as the most spectacular of sunrises. Therefore, most beautiful stranger, I say that your name has to be … has got to be …” Nibbling on her bottom lip, moonstone eyes tight in concentration, Princess Sharu waited for the name of her true love to shape itself before speaking it reverently. “Christalmorg,” she whispered. Hand fluttering to her throat, she held on to her breath.

Her shoulders sagged with disappointment when the delightful young woman shook her head. Mournfully, Princess Sharu looked at the owl settled on the nearby branch. Head cocked to one side, bright yellow orbs for eyes, it was preparing to hoot.

“Then, you must be Tamarand. Yes? Tamarand.” Her features were arranged in the shape of hope. “No? Then Zontale!”

“No,” sighed the young stranger. The owl flapped a moth-eaten wing, cocked her amber eyes at the princess and hooted for the second time.

Princess Sharu's heart was pounding so loudly she could hardly hear herself think. Time, time, precious seconds were scurrying away, unheeded.

The owl shuffled again on the branch. It clucked its curved gray beak, blinked once, blinked twice. Just as she was about to announce the official reign of the night to all the inhabitants of the woods, crazy heartbeats pounding inside her chest, Princess Sharu jumped to her feet. "Dahwan! You are Dahwan of the Sunhorse.” Her moonstone eyes enfolded the beautiful stranger in a palpable cloak of tenderness

"I am! Dahwan is, indeed, the name given to me by the spirits that rule all."

Princess Sharu exuded happiness as she held Dahwan tightly against her breasts. "Now, Dahwan of the Sunhorse, you are also my Princess.” She led Dahwan by the hand.

Dahwan's heart, beating as fast as a butterfly's wings was making her light-headed. "And you are my Mistress," she replied, thoroughly enchanted by the thought of sharing Princess Sharu's couch.

"Come, oh Precious one. Let us not waste a moment longer. We shall live happily together until the spirit from beyond spreads her shadow over us for, even in her realm, we shall be together."

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One evening, at the turn of the season, Princess Sharu caught Dahwan looking at her strangely.

"What is on your mind, My Sweet?" she asked, letting her embroidery needle drop to her lap.

"The depth of your heart, Sharu, is what is on my mind"

"Ah … so deep is my heart, Dahwan, my love, that when I gaze at you I know even the deepest ocean would not begin to fill it."

Sorrow clouded Dahwan's eyes, but she spoke, cryptically at first, about the other land she had known, about her own forest full of flowers that never seemed to grow in this land.

It is then that she became aware of an unsettling, yet familiar, whisper of words repeating themselves deep in her head. She frowned, but doing her best to remain in the present moment, Dahwan said simply, "Sharu, my love, I need to confess to you that I am not a real princess." The words she heard herself say startled her. Her frown deepened.

"My dearest darling, Dahwan of the Sunhorse! The silly things you say sometimes," Princess Sharu replied lightly. "You are a princess, regardless of which lands you have travelled from to come to mine."

“Sharu, listen.” Dahwan made herself be very still, as she summoned the strength to see through to its end the conversation the whispers had been set in motion. “A princess … I am not,” she heard herself say, “though real, I certainly am … as you can see.”

As her eyes met Sharu’s, she added, "She is beyond doubt a real woman, Sharu, she who holds you in her arms, night after night, until you fall asleep. But …” Dahwan hesitated in the face of what she sensed had become inevitable. “A long, long time ago, before you found me asleep at the base of that tree … Let me start again. I didn’t walk into your forest as one normally does. I kind of … flew in to it. Yes. That is exactly what I did. I flew in,” she repeated, careful to keep her tone light.

“And fly you might have, oh you, daughter of the Sun Horse. You have flown right into my heart and there I keep you.”

“No-no … I didn’t fly in as one of the Sun Horse clan, not as the Dahwan that is now in front of you. I did meet a sun horse though. You might even say I saved her life.” A hot blush crept quickly over Dahwan’s cheeks. “Yes … well, my intention was to help her but she being so strong and heavy, I had to call for help-”

“Dahwan, for the love of … of the Lord of the Obscure, stop your babble and come sit with me.”

“Sharu, before we met … I used to be a … I was a butterfly.”

"You! A butterfly?” Princess Sharu interjected violently. The great room became very still. Even Mershira, the old greyhound, stopped scratching herself. On the other side of the heavy drapes, the balmy night air became heavy. “I have loved a … a butterfly? All these weeks?” Princess Sharu jabbed the embroidery needle into the armrest that, until then, had held her forearm most comfortably. All warmth disappeared from her eyes and the ice crystals that replaced it froze Dahwan to the core. “How dared you deceive me so? Me, Princess Sharu!”

“I was a butterfly when I first set eyes upon you. Because of you, I almost died, torn to shreds in the forest. My butterfly heart had become too small to hold all the love that, already then, I knew I felt for you. And so I begged the Magic Man to-”

“Magic Man? Did you say, *Magic Man*? That dithering idiot has been the bane of my existence? He who wormed his way into my forest to become my neighbor?” Princess Sharu stood and strode up to Dahwan. Eyes cold with anger, she wrapped her long fingers around her lover’s neck. “Season after reason, I pushed him back. Repulsed by all that is him, though I let him share a corner of my earth, I refused him my bed. You have made me his pawn, don’t you see?” Though her finger left pale imprints on both side of her neck, Princess Sharu let go of Dahwan. “You have been his revenge. You have made me the butt of his joke.” Princess Sharu gnashed her teeth and shook a fist high above her head. “Oh cruel, cruel destiny!” Spittle glistened at the corners of her lips. “Away from my sight this very night, you deceitful creature! And may the witches of Zafran keep you spread-eagled in their mighty web!” Haughtily, she turned her back to Dahwan and exited the room.

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Dahwan ran into the night. Blinded by burning tears, she stumbled through the arched gateway and into the dense woods. Jostled by low-hanging branches, the twisted fingers of trees tore at her fragile robe, scratched her cheeks leaving ruby-red welts wherever their claws had ripped. Gnarled roots curled around her feet to trip her and spikes from the Hepuria shrubs lanced her feet.

Once again, she cried out to Magic Man, "Please, please!" she sobbed. "Sharu, she spoke with hatred but I don’t doubt her words are true. You tricked me! You’ve had your fun at our expense. So be it, but do not leave me this way. My heart is broken. The forest is tearing at my flesh. I shall die here!"

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Magic Man’s laugh echoed inside the hollow trees. The young woman was right, he had exacted a decent revenge for all the years Princess Sharu had spurned his love, for all the years she had known him hungry for the soothing cool touch of her fingers on his feverish brow. Though it took years to get her there, he now had Princess Sharu shattered and heart broken. “Do unto others as they do unto you,” he shouted, pounding his barreled chest with two hairy fists. But, Magic Man, as repulsive in appearance he might have been, was neither insensitive nor unwise. This young one, he thought, she is a gentle soul. She is innocent of all this.

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After many days and nights of fluttering over wrinkled seas and deserted lands, the little butterfly’s wings, now brittle and dry from the heat that rose up from the sands and bore down from the sun, caused them to falter and the little butterfly plummeted downward.

There, wedged between stamen and petals, she slept and slept some more until she woke up. She twitched her antennae, looked around and stretched her wings as if to check their span. She fluttered here, there and everywhere until she landed on the very edge of a giant Lilli pad. First she sighed, then she grinned. Why, she was home again! Home had come to find her when she could go no further.

"The flowers, the moss,” she exclaimed, awed as if by a discovery. “They are all so beautiful! Their scent is ever so delicate! And aren't these balooas the most wonderful sight to behold?”

The little butterfly lived happily ever after in her forest, somewhere north of east. She held no memory whatsoever of Princess Sharu. As you know, because of their tiny brains, little butterflies cannot possibly hold on to memories.

As for Princess Sharu, she remained all alone in the cold and gloomy castle. She cried and prayed for Dahwan's return. She promised that she would love her, even though she was not a proper princess. She cried, prayed and promised till the end of her days, but the little butterfly had flown too far away to ever hear her.