

Once upon a curse in Faëria

Prologue

Who decides what we will do with our life when we are born on Earth? Will it unfold like the night sky over the day and see our unfulfilled desires shining like the bright side of the moon? If so, by chance alone or because we were born under a lucky star?

Are we led, like puppets, by an invisible and all-powerful intelligence, or is life just an incalculable series of unexpected and accidental moments? Do we ever heed the call of destiny, our destiny?

I believe that all these questions deserve debate by the greatest philosophers of all time, if their ghosts would willingly materialize for a few hours. But I really don't feel like listening to them today.

I tell myself that we are all masters of our destiny, and our paths are not set out in advance because at any moment we have the freedom to choose between at least two possibilities. Hundreds of times in a lifetime we face a crossroads and make a choice by listening to our heart. Sometimes, reason wins the game, and we move further away without knowing it from the destiny chosen by our soul, a soul who travels during a lifetime across the blue planet. Do we then get an opportunity for a second chance, a chance to keep our promises, to follow the secret path of our soul?

My name is Laurie and I sometimes wonder about my own destiny, which I've had the privilege of knowing since childhood. I chose to be born to prepare myself to fight, one day far away, for the survival of Earth. Nothing less.

That said, my life as I knew it was going to change radically overnight. And I had every right to be afraid...

Laurie in Faëria

Walking around the swan lake set in the middle of the royal gardens, Laurie was kicking pebbles off the path with the toe of her satin shoe. Her mind was wandering, and at the moment, it was light-years beyond the Kingdom of Faëria, which had been her home for sixteen years.

The next morning, her seventeenth birthday would be upon her, and this thought filled her with dread. Indeed, come midnight, May 23rd was going to ring out on the castle clock one way or another, and there would be nothing Laurie could do to stop it. Desperately,

she'd hoped to escape the fate that awaited her after the first stroke, but there would be nothing she could do. She had to resign herself to the inevitable.

— If only I had found a magic wand capable of postponing this fateful date until the end of time, she thought to herself.

She let out a long sigh. No, Lady Luck had not been on her side. If her parents had had such a wand, they had certainly hidden its existence from her: the only instrument with the power to change her destiny. While the possibility of their duplicity had crossed her mind, now the mere thought of their deception caused a wave of sadness to wash over her.

Looking down at the golden heart-shaped watch she was wearing on a chain around her neck, Laurie opened the tiny dial. It had been an hour since she'd stolen a glance. How fast the minutes had passed! With this observation, she felt all the blood drain from her veins, all the anticipation and fear. She fell like a rag doll on the nearest marble bench. There was a soft rustling of satin, as her skirt crumpled against the marble. Her gaze empty now and a knot the size of the kingdom in her stomach, she plunged deep into her thoughts, focusing on an invisible spot along the pale blue fabric of her beautiful dress.

She'd been walking in circles for the last few hours and was in no hurry to leave her little paradise, but the wait was nerve-racking. Certainly, part of her was eager to get the whole thing over with.

— Am I slowly losing my mind?

The princess laughed softly to herself. The wait had become more and more excruciating!

— I'm afraid, and yet... maybe I'll never want to come back here once I'm there.

Midnight was fast approaching, and Laurie's heart was tightening, despite her willingness to go through this test with her head held high.

The princess suddenly realized that she'd be looking at her watch in a wholly new way come tomorrow. A new countdown would begin, until she would be faced, in twelve months, with the inexorable choice.

She turned back to the swan lake. A few years back she'd begun observing her existence through a magnifying glass, her memories plastered on the canvas of her mind. Images raced through Laurie's mind, as she stared at the rose garden on the other side of the lake. Her eyes stopped at the trees on the edge of the forest. What would happen tomorrow? No one could say, but the princess tried to hold close the faces, the voices, the scents and colors of her kingdom. Whatever it would take, she wouldn't forget any bit of her time here.

Still, she was painfully aware of the eventuality of never seeing Faëria again. And wasn't Faëria such a beautiful name? A fitting name for the kingdom where she lived, in the middle of an enchanting forest, immersed in a real fairy tale.

Until today, she had lived a happy life in the most beautiful country of the underworld, which extended beneath the earth, in the territory that the world above called France. Her father's castle was located beneath Brittany, but his kingdom covered the north region, from Bourges up to the English Channel.

Her life from birth had been sugar-coated, tied with a golden bow: this she would willingly admit. Laurie had grown up in an ultra-magical environment, cherished by her parents, Queen Naïsha and King Hormidas of Herzog. With her brother, Cedric, a year younger, and her sister, Charlotte, who was approaching her fifteenth birthday, Laurie's

world could be described as the beautiful painting within a gilded and ornate picture frame, carrying her from one cherished day of childhood to the next.

She had discovered that she was good at fairy botany, having inherited her mother's gift. Indeed, the queen had transmitted the magic that had flowed through their veins for generations: the art of using the power of the spirit to handle the forces of the plant and animal kingdoms.

Laurie often ventured just outside the castle gates, to Herzog City, to teach the younger girls some basic embroidery skills, a task that filled her with joy. She was the kingdom's ray of sunshine, the pride of her parents and the eldest of their descendants: the one who was destined to become the queen of one of the other two kingdoms that extended beneath France. Next to her father's kingdom, the territory was divided. On the left was La Rochelle, and on the right, Lyonnaise.

As the inheritor of a prosperous kingdom, Laurie was an ideal candidate: she was responsible, magically gifted and healthy. As for her sleep and any stirrings of worry, generally she slept like a baby, except on the rare occasion when her dreams featured a girl who seemed familiar somehow but who lived in a very different world.

Odd as it may seem, Laurie had never done anything wrong or said anything stupid, not even to her siblings. But there was one concern that plagued her thoughts. What if, heaven forbid, her personality changed tomorrow? Impossible! She would remain fundamentally herself, despite any challenges.

The face of the beautiful young man she was secretly in love with suddenly flashed into mind. A man whose face she thought of as 'angelic'—long hair, fascinating eyes and a chiselled chin—a man whom a young girl of her noble rank could never approach, since he was only a knight.

Laurie didn't see him often, but every time she did, his beauty took her breath away. It took everything she had to try to forget him. And she absolutely didn't want to know his first name; she wanted to ignore his very presence. Such a stance helped her keep her distance. Nevertheless, she had finally succumbed to a nickname: 'the Archangel'. If she had been a normal person, she might have dared to speak to him. But it would have been selfish for her to confess her love, then to be loved by him and finally to tell him that she had to leave, against her will and without any promise of return.

The princess sighed one last time, gathering all her strength to commit the Archangel's gorgeous face to memory.

She resumed her solitary walk, then turned and glanced up at the sky of her underworld where the shining disc, a crystal light that had illuminated their kingdom since the dawn of time, shone with a familiar golden glow. She had been told that it was the same as the sunlight of a warm spring day in the world above. The world of the surface was a very strange one. She had learned a great deal about it in her class on Earth's history, dedicated to the customs and life of the nations living above the underground realms.

Their castle, cast in an immaculate whiteness, stood in turrets crowned with royal blue tiles. It had thousands of windows decorated with black and gold studs. The palace with its colorful display of the colors of the Faëria Kingdom's flag had seen her grow up amid a fabulous family. Explored from top to bottom, it had resonated with her laughter from childhood to now, early... yes, early adulthood. She was almost an adult. Laurie almost shivered at the thought.

"Your Highness," called Kelianne.

Her lady-in-waiting had silently approached.

“Kelianne!” Laurie exclaimed, putting her hand on her mouth to stifle her scream.

“What’s the matter with you, creeping up on me and surprising me like that? Do you wish me dead?”

“No, Princess Laurie,” stammered her lady-in-waiting before apologizing.

“Although it might be a good idea,” Laurie added, looking as if condemned.

“A good idea, Your Highness? Your words frighten me. You’re not thinking through what you’re saying, are you?”

“No, of course not, Kelianne, but perhaps death would be gentler compared to what is waiting for me. My future is very uncertain right now.”

Immediately, Laurie started wondering:

— How will my life start tomorrow? Nothing will ever be the same. If only I wasn’t born with this curse. I could have continued a normal life as a princess.

Once more, she was lost in the labyrinth of her thoughts.

Kelianne touched her arm.

“Come now, Princess Laurie, your family is waiting for you for the evening meal and for the last-minute considerations.”

Kelianne’s voice was filled with sadness.

Her task as lady-in-waiting required her to follow the princess around like a shadow, but her role was far greater than that. One year older than Laurie, she had become her confidante and best friend since Laurie’s thirteenth birthday. To Laurie, it had seemed like forever. Kelianne grabbed Laurie’s arm, as she revealed the latest gossip of the kingdom, obviously hoping to take her friend away from her dark thoughts. It was Kelianne whom the princess could count on to make her smile whenever she subsided into melancholia, which had often happened in recent months.

Kelianne’s fairy name meant ‘sweet with a huge heart’. In addition to being an optimistic soul with a cheerful countenance, she was always on hand to help the princess with any projects that wistfully entered the princess’s head.

— I’m going to miss her so much, Laurie sighed, as she half-listened to her dear friend, distractedly nodding but without letting on that she really wasn’t listening.

After the evening meal, during which the last-minute preparations for her departure monopolized the whole conversation, Laurie kissed her family, one by one. Although her grief entered in a rush, she bravely held back tears. Then she disappeared from the banquet hall, in a delicate swirl of apple green satin, to spend the last few hours alone in the turret that housed her private chambers.

As she walked through the main hall and upstairs to her room, a smile lit up her face. The inhabitants of the castle, who had long been desolate at the prospect of losing her one day, had recently placed roses on each step, roses with red and white petals, pink and blue. She lifted one stem to inhale the flower’s rich aroma before holding it against her heart.

After helping Laurie prepare for bed, Kelianne brushed her long ginger hair. She stored Laurie’s favorite jewelry in a box of waxed wood, then put the princess to bed, taking her hand and squeezing gently.

“Do you need anything else, Laurie?”

No *Princess* this time.

This omission made the farewell more intimate, Kelianne subtly conveying the deep affection she felt for her *princess* by ‘forgetting’ the royal title.

“Courage,” murmured the princess, her voice tense with emotion.

Kelianne responded, “It won’t fail you, I’m sure. If only I could take your place...”

“It’s not possible, my dear friend. As I’ve been preparing for many years, everything will be fine. However, I must admit that tomorrow will be the strangest day of my life.”

“And mine too,” Kelianne replied, looking worried.

Her gentle doe’s gaze landed one last time on the princess, her eyes filled with a message that only Laurie could decipher; then Laurie’s confidante left the room, while obviously trying as hard as she could to hold back her tears.

Laurie’s throat was knotted, but her heart was now beating more slowly and quietly than before. Unable to sleep, she kept her eyes wide open and stared into the darkness. The wait was becoming more and more unbearable. Suddenly, Laurie turned on her back and hugged her pillow so tightly no one would have been able to pry it loose; she thought of the clock, which had become her main enemy. Soon it would call out midnight, with its usual three consecutive strokes.

On the third stroke, there was a sudden wind, as if a sudden evening’s breath, a sensation that only Laurie could feel. She was leaving now, into another world. It was terrifying, her soul being wrenched from her body. She resisted at first, then surrendered to the mysterious power that governed her destiny.