

Twilight's Daughter

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1st edition

Made by Lea

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Gentle dust motes lit by a slice of light above the door filtered into the bedroom. It was probably about three o'clock in the morning and as the thought passed Alina's mind so the ancient clock in the hall, with its muffled chime, confirmed it. She had to sleep, just had to sleep, but the thought of what was coming the following day was so extremely exciting. It was also slightly ominous like all your Christmases wrapped up into one, but something which was permanent. It didn't bother anyone else, she thought as she lay there, her delicate frame heaving with a little too much breath. Then, quietly to begin with came the muffled sound of a voice. Then another. She felt that sense of being locked into attempting to decipher words from the vibrations that travelled through her bed-frame.

Day broke, it seemed like it had only been a second before she had been struggling with her sheets. Light now bathed her bed, golden through the classic modernised Venetian blinds. She froze for a second, realising that it had come, the day she and everyone else on this side waited for. It was time for her to move to the other side.

Stumbling as she rose, she was almost too nervous to slip into her comfortable clothes. Nothing about today was normal. Ten minutes later the shutters to her house tumbled back against the walls held up by beams of light and she came scooting out into the bright morning sunlight which was reflected against the other half of the dark sky. She suddenly remembered something, swiftly picking up her music and camera. Something about Alina was different from the other young men and women who joined her as she hurried along to the ceremony. Maybe it was the fact she listened to old style headphones and carried a camera, even to the portal, or maybe it was her long

puff of curly black hair; not something that was usually selected for by parents these days, or maybe it was the fact that she didn't seem as "flawless" as these others and her parents hadn't been so prescriptive about her genetic makeup. Using a camera at the portal was forbidden by the immortals, though it was because of respect and ritualistic issues, not for any other reason.

Skitting through the sunlight up the stairs to the amphitheatre, which was erected by the ancients, Alina stood among the others who were ready for their initiation. The architecture added to the atmosphere of this city; lots of walls were generated through the harnessing of power which generated light with a density, which meant it had the ability to hold objects easily in mid-air. Many Grecian columns were supported by beams of pure white light, stairs were often made purely of light. It would be disconcerting for someone from the past to take the walk so often made by people of this age. Many buildings were held aloft above their heads, not to mention the distant butterfly roof as it was called.

The projection started. One of the immortals stood between two long white columns in front of the huge tower which spat up into the sky. His, or was it her, features faultlessly emulated human expression and oozed charisma, it spoke with authority and grace.

"Our youngsters today see their path into a perfect future, one which they have always dreamed of. For today, our youngsters, having learned what it is to be human, walk through the gate and into Ou-topos." After a short pause, the immortal turned and simulated sauntering through the gate, which had opened for the crowd to see. There was a light and polite applause. Alina wanted to shout out with enthusiasm but something caught her voice. Then something caught her nerves.

It was so effortless. The act. The immortal with their immaculate pristine features and voice, the gate. More words came from their mouth, yet in her head the words said vibrated with Panglossian platitude and momentarily

the face of the ancient became just that - an eon old, a mask of death, or even that of a psychopathic mortician. As she watched, the first names were being called out and the enlightened and happy individuals were pacing through it, to be seen on the other side in Ou-topos. The world around them as it stood now was already as utopian as could be, but Ou-topos was beacon like. The images from the other side of the gate showed perfection beyond the wildest of realities, and even while the portal's view was restricted, it was still enough to catch glimpses of other individuals who had lived there for many years, but still remained in stasis, optimum in appearance and held endlessly in a youthful state.

In Ou-topos it was reported hardly anyone ever died, the technology that was available was so incredible that resources were abundant and overflowing. Whatever you wanted was there, whatever you could imagine in your wildest dreams. But then how much could one dream of?

One of the girls next to her put her hand on her shoulder, "I'm really looking forward to this," she said as she smiled. Then she looked at Alina a little closer and her faultless smile dropped slightly, "I hope you're going to enjoy it too." she said, then her smile faded completely followed by a vague frown.

By now there was a kind of knotted, boiling itch swelling inside Alina's gut. She turned away and looked down the stairs leading up to the amphitheatre, over the courtyard and across the flat pond. Everything she had ever known was here, and she was expected to walk through a window made of translucent material into a world she had simply been told was better. There was something disturbing about the portal; it was a clinical looking square panel, for all intents and purposes like a sheet of glass no thicker than your little finger, the membrane coloured a kind translucent purple, the tube which connected to the back was ostensibly an electric cord, but in Alina's mind it slowly transmogrified into an umbilical cord. She repeated in her mind that she had been told Ou-topos was better. The thought echoed through her mind for a couple of seconds before she slipped away from the

crowd gathered there. Lost in her thoughts, wandering down the cold white light steps, making her way to the glass-like pond. She crouched at the side, watching the fish in their pattern. What if the people on the other side were like those fish?

A professor was standing beside her, “Last minute nerves?” the professor asked. She knelt next to Alina and put her hand on her shoulder, “Are you thinking those fish are like people who pass to the other side?”

Alina had her face planted in her knees in a daydream, and moving her head so that her cheek lent against her knee, she looked at the professor, she thought about saying something, then stopped. While in her crouched position her mind wandered again, something was swimming around like fish in her mind which she was trying to grasp. The professor had seen this before - other people like her, being scared to pass over. She also had the correct lines and predicted responses. This meant that whatever the professor had said before had worked on them, but Alina was having doubts, so she didn't want them to work in the same way on her.

She shuffled a little, stood, and walked away.

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Aimless strolling helped Alina, connecting with her body like that seemed to help the thought patterns move around her mind. Adjusting her pace, she decided to drop in somewhere nearby to find something to eat before heading for home. Deciding upon a narrow and more run down part of town, Alina wandered aimlessly; the city had changed now that she had doubted. Something about doubting something certain made everything slightly less real. At school they had taught them all critical thinking skills. She realised that maybe she and many others were being fed an idea of a world better

than the one she was standing in now. Solipsism would state that objective reality is a false premise - for proving reality exists requires use of that reality to prove its existence.

She made her way to the “Chinese” shop, it was most unique since most things had been homogenised; in the twentieth century, mixing worldwide cuisines had been known as “fusion food”, now all food was fusion. It was peculiar because it meant that all food had become unquestioningly boring. It was all the same, yet varied enough. It was all pre-packaged and prepared. Of course, the biowar had also done away with anything natural. Shoving a few things in her backpack she left and walked home through an unfamiliar alley. This was the other thing, she thought, these back streets and alleys were deserted yet nobody came here and nobody really doubted anything, or thought “why” anymore why was this backstreet abandoned and why isn’t anyone here? She thought about Socrates and his method and the reasons why he was put to death which amounted to “asking philosophical questions”.

Everything here was geared at getting you through that gate and on to the other side, because once you’re there, you’re in paradise. That’s what they tell you. Why would anyone doubt it? It had been a central part of learning for them as children and it would be ridiculous to give up on Ou-topos if it really was as heavenly as they said it was. Maybe all the learning was for nothing, since when you arrived, you didn’t have to actually do anything ever again.

Getting home was comforting in many ways, but also felt wrong somehow. The photo images which illuminated the walls all seemed malapropos, sitting slanted, juxtapositions and tangents shone from their edges, splits of sharp light like shards of glass.

Sitting on her bed, splitting the package open from the edge and biting into the cold “food” inside felt satisfying. A noise spilled out from the front room, and unthinkingly, Alina said “answer”, and one of the walls lit up with the image of her parents. She could see it, down the hallway from her bedroom.

It jolted her from her reverie; oh shit, shit, shit she thought. She stood, adjusted her clothes, her hair, and wandered into the living room.

“Hello dad, mum!” she said, pasting a smile on her face, looking across from one to the other. They were smiling back, perfect rows of teeth.

“Darling, hello!” Her mum said back through the screen, “Why didn’t we see you today? You were supposed to be at the gate, weren’t you?” A slight wrinkle of the forehead was supposed to denote care. Alina wondered for a second if it was care at all.

“Uh... Yes! I went this morning,” considering for a moment what was to be said next to fill the gap and hoping that the “uh” at the start hadn’t sounded like disgust, she continued, “there were lots of people there,” nodded for effect, “lots of people, so, I decided maybe tomorrow would be better.”

Her mother looked through the screen at her, “What’s going on Alina? We have been apart for years now and we really miss you, and here we are in Ou-topos. Obviously we’re missing you. It’s wonderful here.”

Her father interrupted, “Listen, Alina. I’m not sure what’s going through your mind, but obviously there are doubts.”

Alina looked for a moment at the screen and her dad, her smile had slipped on one side, she sat down on the edge of a chair looking small.

“Well, um, what do you think?” She asked, “Listen, I don’t quite know what to say, I just thought tomorrow might be better, and give me more time to think, that’s all.”

“Think about what?” her mum shot back immediately, “this place has everything you could ever need. It’s time to come home darling. You really must come home, please,” her mum begged with puppy dog eyes, “getting

this far is a feat in itself as well, I'm scared you might get something." She looked up at her husband and leaned her face against his chest as if for protection.

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The call had ended some time ago. It had just petered out.

Her mum had buried her head there; her dad hadn't said much more. Peeling herself from the chair she had propped herself upon she felt suddenly exhausted. This had all been too much, and too many things to contemplate. A sick wave of guilt had started to wash over her. What had she been thinking? This was the greatest and best opportunity in her life; all of her friends were just walking through that portal, and none of the people she had known in school were going to be here now. They had all passed through to the other side, happily. One of the pictures on her living room wall seemed to alter - it was a picture of her friend from school who had gone into Ou-topos, and this picture was an update. She was standing there with her parents smiling from ear to ear. She looked so happy.

"Will I ever see her again?" thought Alina, and feeling sicker than she had just a few seconds ago, she stumbled to bed to rest her head.

For a while she slept soundly. This fortified and strengthened her. The wall next to her illuminated her bedroom an hour later. She opened her eyes and said "answer", again almost as a subconscious reaction. She had spent so much time feeling completely safe about everything, so thinking of not answering seemed foreign to her brain.

It was her dad speaking in his usual staccato rhythm he started.

"Listen Alina", he looked grave and upset, "your mother and I love you very much, and we really miss you", he said, "I can't make you to come. Your

mother and I know that you're different. You're one of a kind, and I know that means that you don't always make the same decisions that everyone else does. There's nothing wrong with that, but you have to understand that regardless of what you've thought up, it's wrong. It's just wrong."

Alina let the light wash onto her skin, "what makes you think I'm wrong dad?" she asked. She immediately resolved to attempt to stop asking rhetorical questions which only led her dad to answer the questions with more unhelpful comments.

"No wait, don't answer that. Listen, dad, I'm sorry," she said, and before she could continue he jumped in again.

"Good. I'm glad you're sorry, I think you should stop this and come here tomorrow, please. We really miss you, we love you very much. Your mother is still awake and I know she is crying in the other room. If you're wondering, the process of walking through is totally painless. You're simply transported here and then once you're here, well, it's paradise, truly! You can't get ill from bacterial illnesses, and you could not ask for more. But I don't know what else you could doubt. You can see me here, I'm happy and so is your mother. I can't imagine what it could be that would stop you."

Alina attempted to reply, "Once I go, that's it, I'm through. Coming back isn't an option, so I want to keep my options open."

Her dad rationally interrupted with, "By not making a decision to come you're making a decision".

This stumped her. By deciding to stay she was making a decision. Of course she was.

"Okay," Alina sighed, "I'll come, please tell mum I'll be there tomorrow."

Her dad smiled on the screen, "That makes me very happy to hear Alina, we

shall both look forward to you being here tomorrow.”

The screen slowly reduced in intensity as he left the call.

From somewhere came the sound of voices talking, was it the same pair of voices, she thought? Maybe. Concentrating harder this time, she realised that the angle from which she thought the voices were coming from was strange; it seemed to be above her, despite the fact all that was up there was a loft. The worry entered her mind that illness could strike at any time, maybe this was it? Hearing voices. She turned to attempt to listen closer, but once again, as she thought she was starting to listen, she awoke to sharp sunlight.

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Skipping through the light again, down the steps, joining a few others as they made their way to the same amphitheatre, it struck Alina just how white all of the buildings were. They all had beautiful Grecian columns and arched doorways, it was as if someone had scrubbed them with toothpaste and a brush. Lucky tooth brushes were now antiques; if you wore out a set of teeth you simply requested a growth treatment from the doctor; a few days later you would have a freshly grown set. It was largely how they dealt with health care these days - they would put you to sleep and stimulate cells to regrow your teeth in exacting shape and expected form, and every time you would be rejuvenated, but it still seemed that everyone had to make the journey through the portal into Ou-topos.

Alina was listening to her music; unlike her friends she liked what they called classic rock, her favourite band was Other Lives, not many of her friends knew this band, the words of the song “Easy Way Out” filtered into

her ears “...you control the weather and I’ll pay the rent, we can be happy in this settlement, if we can find an easy way out.”

Facing the portal again, she felt as if someone was looking over her shoulder. Was there something wrong with her? Her father and mother were both waiting for her just beyond that portal, yet she still stood there. Maybe it was the music she was listening to. The immortals always said that music could be suggestive and warp the mind, and the words continued; “Until it finds you, the ever slow burn of many years behind you”. She turned because an unnerving feeling made her feel someone really was watching over her shoulder. Looking back again at the gate she watched as people wandered through happily, waving from the other side, embracing their loved ones.

She took a few steps forward, walking past enraptured people who suddenly were children to her eyes. She turned as she walked to face these people and saw light in their eyes as they stared at the screen which now towered above her. They were applauding with enthusiasm. Then something struck her again; these people were just applauding a television screen with the notion that it was their friend smiling from the other side of the veil, and who wouldn’t take the offer of eternal life with family and loved ones?

An unnerving feeling overcame her again, it was a feeling that this wasn’t what they told them it was, and the need to escape became urgent within her, “If we can find an exit out,” ironically filtered into her ears. Attempting to turn, she found a wall of smiling people slowly walking towards her; the gap closed between herself and those in front, like a pincer. Hands, arms and bodies were all facing one direction, making their way forward, in the crush she began to panic, ducking clumsily to one side, she moved herself between the arms and legs, until she got far enough away from the screen, the portal and the other people and walked away, feeling hot and panicked.

Conflicted, she slowly wandered home again.

Sitting with her brow furrowed deeply, she sat sketching in her device as it floated there. Over and over she would draw the perverse, oval, pulpy, vaguely alive looking portal mouth, and over and over she contemplated, what did it mean? Who could she go to? She thought about running away to the city limits, out from under the butterfly wing above which regulated day and night, sun and moon, and start looking around there for answers, but it was pointless; the city simply petered out and turned into pathetic tumble weed and small fields and the few trees that were left apparently forlornly stood arching towards the city as if they felt left out.

It was also perpetual twilight out there.

The teachers had also told her that since the earth was slowly being emptied due to the tidal locking and bacterial infections, everyone was going to Ou-topos. To the endless pristine fields of this other life. The wilds beyond the border of the city were returning to natural habitats. Violent creatures lurked in the woods. They had seen in class that some people having reached the city edge by accident and had been unexpectedly mauled by something which had left unidentifiable marks and had later been returned to hospital where they had been restored to pristine health.