

Elysium

by Leah Williams

“When we understand that ontology has a digital analogue indistinguishable from our current perception of reality—in that moment, the Singularity will transform from fantasy to inevitability.”

Bob Morden, CEO of Chou Games

“I confess that Magick it self teacheth many superfluous things, and curious prodigies for ostentation; leave them as empty things, yet be not ignorant of their causes.”

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *Of Occult Philosophy*

Every locus has a sort of quarantine area, or waystation, where visitors review the local restrictions and contractually affirm they will abide by them. The waystation is also a preview of the locus you’re about to visit. Verne 8j33po9045x locus seemed to be some kind of steampunk world; its waystation looked like a techno-Victorian library. Lots of plants and velvet, the room permeated with the dusty smell of decaying leather and books and filled with gilded mechanical contraptions. One looked like a personal digital music player, another like an external positioning system. In the interest of “authenticity,” this locus didn’t allow intelligences to appear in anything outside of the normal human form—any divergences from all known human genetic code would get you booted, fined, even imprisoned if you really pissed off the local administrator. Thea didn’t have any problems there. Like many organically born intelligences, she’d kept the essence of what she looked like when she had eschewed her flesh for a purely digital existence within the network—with a few small improvements: a stronger jaw, higher cheekbones. She still resembled herself.

Thea perused the local by-laws and found she had to wear a costume here, something that would be appropriate in a nineteenth century context. Scanning her voluminous catalog of wardrobe outputs, Thea found a couple of antebellum party dresses that would have to do. After the corset clenched around her waist and the heavy skirts and petticoats bloomed around her legs, Thea glanced at her reflection in an ugly, old-fashioned mirror leaning against a bookshelf. *Great*, she thought, *I look like an ambulatory cupcake*. Thea ran a finger along the twee lacy piping, amazed that anyone found dressing up in these clothes to be fun. But she wasn’t visiting this locus to have a good time. She had to find Jack. Thea sensed she was running out of time.

An automaiden stared at Thea vacantly from behind a large oak desk, the afternoon sun illuminating her artfully tousled red curls. She could have blended into a crowd of Dickens extras if not for her gold-rimmed monocle, which glimmered with shifting white characters—input of some kind. Autos weren’t truly synthetic intelligences; they were no more intellectually sophisticated than the data tracking software of the early 21st Century. All responses and simulated personality were pre-programmed.

“Good afternoon,” the automaiden said to Thea, who supposed it must always be so for the robot. This one had a hollow British accent.

“I will be visiting the locus for a projected 3 hours,” Thea said.

“Identity confirmed. Can I please get a verbal confirmation from you, Miss Thea?”

“Thea 17g590k687301h24. I affirm I am she.”

The automaiden’s monocle shimmered with information. “Verbal confirmation

acknowledged. I will also require a digital signature affirming your adherence to local restrictions...thank you, signature confirmed. A temporary pass viable for 3 hours time has been issued. Do you have a preferred Drop?"

"I am looking for an intelligence named Magus, identification code 92k830u836401c42. Is he in the public listings?" Thea asked, unconsciously mimicking the machine's English intonation, emphasizing "in."

Magus, registered network administrator and on the list of names Thea had memorized before burning it. Names that might lead her to Jack, if she was both careful and lucky.

"Synthetic Intelligence Magus 92k830u836401c42 is indeed in the public listing. His place of residence is being transferred to your internal positioning system. The nearest Drop is at the north perimeter of the Eyrie superstructure, approximately .97 kilometers from Magus's residence. Is this drop point convenient?"

The automaiden gazed vacuously at Thea. God, but they always gave her the chills, these tepid digital imitations of intelligence. "Yeah," Thea said. "That'll do."

Something cleared in the automaiden's vision. The swarm of numbers on the monocle vanished, marking a shift so sudden and profound it was as though Thea were speaking to a different person altogether. "You must hurry, Thea," the automaiden whispered. "He is going to go to the Fields of Elysia. You must stop him."

"What are the 'Fields—'" But before she could finish, Thea's visual input dissolved into blank white light as her software integrated itself with the Verne Locus.

Thea cried out and nearly fell as the input resolved to reflect her surroundings—a slender iron bridge suspended by braids of steel that disappeared into the yellow clouds. She was at least a mile above the ground, the cirrostratus forming a citrine floor thousands of feet below, a carmine sky glazing everything with a patina of red. Thea gripped the rail and tried to marshal her consciousness from its terror. She saw that the bridge linked to a floating city that appeared to be held aloft by mechanized fans. The whimsy and oddness of the image jerked her out of her paralysis, and she relaxed her grip on the rail. Her internal positioning system found that Magus would be on the outskirts of the city—which must be the Eyrie superstructure the automaiden had referred to.

Some Drop.

As Thea walked toward the Eyrie, she turned over the auto's last words. Had Jack programmed a message into the robot? She knew of many loci that called themselves Elysion or variations thereof. Too many leads to possibly follow up on, at least not in the limited amount of time she had. Perhaps she would ask Magus about it.

Thea panted as she reached the gates of the city, her stiff leather boots clacking over the grille in a disjointed stutter as she struggled to take in air. The corset seemed to clench her torso tighter as the minutes went by.

The gates looked like they'd been plucked straight from a Mary Shelley novel, the black iron twisted into cruel points and fussy detailing. The gothic theme was maintained in the architecture of the city, warded by spires and thick with houses and halls that were both gaudy and sinister. Luckily, no one was about; if they had seen Thea's dress, she would have been subject to glares of disdain for the spangled pink confection, if not the booted back to the waystation.

Magus's home was in a cliché of a dark side street. A wooden sign reading "Uncanny Alley" pointed crookedly down the road. It was narrow and cobbled, with dusty, disused shop windows and a stray black cat that was programmed to hiss at passersby. Thea hissed back. A black wooden board above the door to Magus's house said "ODDITIES" in tall gold letters that were abstracted by a layer of grime.

Perfect.

Thea reached out to ring the doorbell, but before her hand gripped the brass pull, the black door swung upon of its own accord, emitting a bleak *creeeeeee?* for effect.

She exhaled a long, stuttering breath before walking inside, trying to forget the horror stories she'd heard about the booby traps network administrators laid around their homes. Being sucked into deadspace and lost there for years, or transported to a random locus where tyrannosaurus rexes thundered through the jungle, hungry for human “flesh.” *You'll be just fine*, Thea told herself. *He's probably expecting you, anyway*. She walked through the black door.

“While the population feeds
Junk floats on polluted water
An old custom to sell your daughter”

The audio blast nearly knocked Thea from her feet. It was programmed to only be audible to people within the house, apparently, unless it was a very weird alarm system—this was also entirely possible, given who she was dealing with. Network admins like Magus were either pathologically eccentric or as dull as stones.

After becoming accustomed to the thumping beat of Siouxi and the Banshees, she heard laughter and the low, variable undertone of a large group of people conversing. A party, then.

Thea followed the source of the buzz to a grand ballroom. It was draped in black and gold, the ceiling painted with shifting patterns of constellations and astronomical phenomena which illuminated the room. The walls and floor were comparatively conventional: ebony-painted oak paneling hung with gold velvet and black marble flooring shot through with streaks of gold. The hall was peopled with gothic beauties and Victorian freaks dressed in leather and silks, corsets and breeches, top hats and waistcoats. There must have been a hundred of them dancing, gossiping, eating, kissing, laughing.

“Ohhhhh, how sweet!” a flamboyant voice to her right purred. Thea turned and saw she was being addressed by a tall male vampire with flowing golden curls and fangs that protruded slightly from his coquettish smile. “Scarlett O'Hara came! We ran out of barbecue *hours* ago, my dear; I hope you aren't too disappointed, but you know what Mammy would say if she caught you eating in public. Naughty, naughty.” He slapped her arm with a folded fan.

“Yeah, we'll, if I have a go at the mini-quiches it will be our secret, won't it?” Thea said. She hitched up the lacy bodice with a grimace.

“Of course, my treasure. You'll never go hungry again. You're new here, hmm? What's your name?” The vampire snapped his fan open, peering cheekily at her from behind the painted image upon it—a geisha who was looking up from behind *her* fan.

“I'm Thea. Are you Magus?”

The vamp squealed in delight. “Magus! Am I Magus? Oh my treasure, I will be telling *that one* at parties for months!”

“Not Magus. Got it. Do you know where I can find him?”

“You are just as determined as Miss O'Hara yourself, aren't you? Well, to answer your first question, I am called Madame Tussaud. It is a *pleasure* to make your acquaintance, Thea. Secondly, Magus is where he always is when he throws a party.” Madame Tussaud snapped his fan shut.

“Where might that be?”

“In his study, being *boring*.”

“Not the best host, then,” Thea said.

“Hardly, but he always has fabulous guests and such good taste in music.” Siouxi had given way to Britney Spears.

“So where's Magus's study?” Thea said. The music was precipitating flashbacks to junior high dances—memories she vowed to wipe once she got home. She didn't really need to relive Shawn O'Brien's braces getting caught on the zipper of her taffeta dress.

“Come play with us, Thea. Magus is so very dull. You'll have much more fun dancing and drinking and meeting all of my darling friends. They will eat you up.” Madame Tussaud giggled.

“Not literally, I hope,” Thea said. “I hate to be dull, but I'm on a tight schedule. I really need Magus's help tracking someone down.”

“Ohh, he is good at that. My ex ran off on me and pulled himself out of the public registry, so I had no idea where he went. Magus found him in some awful prehistoric caveman locus banging a Raquel Welch look-alike. Ugh.” Madame Tussaud scowled and tossed back what Thea hoped was a glass of red wine. “Okay, here's the deal, Miss Scarlett. Magus doesn't allow anyone—no matter how cute or feisty they are—into his study. He'll come down for a perfunctory meet-and-greet soon though, so you'll get to speak then. In the meantime, can't I please get you a beverage?”

Thea sighed. It was that or go poking around in a network admin's house—never the best idea. “Okay,” she relented, thinking of the way Jack's nose scrunched up when he smiled. “But promise me you'll help me out if Magus isn't feeling chatty. It's really important.”

Madame Tussaud squealed again and grabbed her arm, his long red nails digging into her skin. “Of course! We'll have so much fun! This locus can get *so* incestuous, you know? We never get to see new faces. Unless we're making them for ourselves, of course,” he tittered.

“How long have you been living here?” Thea asked as Madame Tussaud guided her across the black marble floor to a group of revelers. Combined, the black silk and velvet they wore would have been enough fabric for king's funeral mass.

“Oh, *ages*. Almost two years now, if you can believe it. I really need a new scene. But there's nowhere interesting. I mean, I was thinking of a noir kind of locus, you know, lots of glamor and cigarette holders and fabulous old cars. But they're just overrun by awkward Nick Charles wannabes. What's a girl to do?”

“Looks pretty fresh, Madame.” This from a beautiful blonde woman in the circle—beautiful, that was, except for her nose. She had chosen a huge beak of a nose which jutted oddly from her otherwise sweet face.

“Doesn't she just look like the freshest thing you've ever seen?” Madame Tussaud cooed. He held Thea out at arm's length so the crowd could get a good look at her. “May I present my new friend Thea,” he said.

Thea curtsied clumsily, her cheeks warming. “Nice to meet you, I'm sure,” she mumbled.

“Precious,” said an androgynous Byron look-alike wearing an acid green velvet frock coat. He leaned over to pinch her cheek and Thea caught the scent of his cologne. It smelled like daffodils.

“So, anyway, I told Manson that I just couldn't possibly watch his cat while he went on holiday to that wretched American Graffiti locus,” the blonde woman said to her companion.

The rest of the little knot turned from the newcomer and involved themselves in the *jolie laide* blonde's story. Thea sighed in relief. The Pet Shop Boys boomed on the invisible sound system: “West End Girls.”

Thea tried to ooze over to the refreshment table, which even in this digital world served as respite for the shy and antisocial. It was strange how much these parties reminded her of teenaged awkwardness in school gyms. Thea doubted many of these people had ever been into a junior high school—not real ones, at least. As the blonde had said, there were loci where intelligences experienced idealized versions of sock hops and proms; where Buddy Holly himself crooned instead of cheesy DJs vainly trying to start up conga lines.

“Where did you think you were going, missy?” Madame Tussaud scolded, sidling up next to Thea as she spooned some foul looking dip onto a crystal plate. He was joined by the Byron doppelganger.

“Oh, you know,” Thea said lamely. She couldn't well claim she was hungry. Nobody got

hungry unless they wanted to.

"I think Magus makes the food disgusting on purpose, as a joke. Nobody's taste can be *that* bad," 'Byron' said.

Thea wanted to use the music selection as counter-evidence to that claim—Blondie's "Heart of Glass" was on now—but she suspected Madame Tussaud might have had a hand in it. "I don't think I got your name," she said instead.

"Phaeton Bode," he said with a bow. "So sorry—I'm a beast and utterly without manners. Just a handsome face." He smiled dazzlingly at her. Yes—a sensitive brow strewn with dark curls was set above piercing gray eyes. The nose was strong and fair, but slightly kinked, suggesting just a hint of brutishness beneath. Rosebud lips and a masculine jaw made a mockery of gender distinctions. Maybe more Brando than Byron, Thea decided.

"It is very good," she agreed. "Did you design it yourself?"

"Phaeton designs *such* beautiful faces," Madame Tussaud said. "He did the most gorgeous one for me, once, but I lost the code somehow."

"You are so careless about backing up your data," Phaeton said. He poured himself a goblet of some blue punch that smoked faintly once in the glass.

"I know, it was like losing the Mona Lisa," moaned Tussaud.

"If only you had been content with the one I made for you and hadn't gone changing your face every twenty minutes you wouldn't be in this situation," Phaeton said. "Oh goddess above, this tastes awful. This is why you don't drink something that looks like smurf come. Honestly."

Thea grimaced and rethought the dip. Probably not worth the risk, she concluded, setting it on the table.

"Yeah, but it gets so boring wearing the same one all the time," Tussaud said, now looking into a hand mirror and powdering his arsenic-white face.

"The best thing about the face I made for Tussaud," Phaeton said to Thea, "Was not that it was beautiful—well, it was, but the point is, *it was him*. Do you see what I mean? It wouldn't have looked right on anyone else, because it was all Tussaud."

Tussaud snapped his compact shut. "*Madame* Tussaud, thank you very much," he said. There was a tense silence. Thea stared at a tray of grayish vienna sausages while Madame Tussaud and Phaeton glared at one another.

"So, how do you know Magus?" Thea said to neither one in particular.

"He's an old friend of Madame Tussaud's," Phaeton said.

"Very funny, darling. I got on the wrong side of the law when I was living in a Haight locus a few years ago. Magus was the one who booked me."

"That's one way to make a friend," Thea said.

"We didn't become friends," Tussaud said. "He's really my parole officer. I have to live in the same locus as him for another five years. *Five years*. So wherever he goes, I go."

"You're not friends with him, but you come to parties at his house."

"We like to torture him as much as he's tortured us," Madame Tussaud said.

The horrible pop music made sense now.

"Are you all parolees?" she asked.

"Mostly. There's a law that says we can come and visit our parole officer whenever we want. We just choose to all come at once and bring friends." Madame Tussaud's lips twisted into a smile. "And Magus makes like a nice host and brings out food and disappears into his study for a few hours until he gets fed up, comes out here and tells us all to shove off."

"Sounds like fun," Thea said.

"Well, that's what you get for trying to delete people, isn't it?" Phaeton said.

"You actually tried to delete someone?" Thea asked with interest. It had been done only four times in the past two centuries. Being deleted was really the only way you could die in the

network.

“No, I didn't try to *delete* someone. I just sort of... rearranged his personality. But it was for his own good!”

“Ouch. Let me guess—he wasn't into fangs?” Thea said.

“He was very depressed and I was just trying to make him happy,” Madame Tussaud said. “And I'm still not sorry I tried, he was—and probably still is—a complete mess.”

Phaeton rolled his eyes. “Love, it would have taken more than a little tinkering to fix *him* up.”

“What was wrong with him?” Thea asked.

“Well,” Madame Tussaud said. “He was a synthetic intelligence...”

“And?” Most of the intelligences knocking around the network were synthetic. It still carried some stigma, but less than it used to. Much less.

“He had been created by someone to think he was *real*. And then he found out that he wasn't. This person who created him, she implanted fake memories so that he thought he was real—I mean, organic, you know?”

“Wow,” Thea said faintly. Inside, her mind was roiling. They knew—they had to know. They'd been playing with her all this time. But could it be a coincidence? Or could he be talking about someone else? No—no, he couldn't possibly...

“Yeah, and he thought they like, were brother and sister. She had gone through and given him a lifetime of memories from the real world, of them together. He just kind of—well... lost it, when he found out. Poor Jack,” Madame Tussaud said. “Such a sweetie.”

A decent song, finally: Joe Tex's “The Love You Save (May Be Your Own).” Thea didn't hear it, though. She hardly heard herself when she said “How awful. How did you try to fix him?”

Madame Tussaud sighed. “I tried to wipe his memories. That's why the authorities thought I was trying to delete him, I was accessing the network's copy of his consciousness and purging stuff. I didn't delete anything permanently, though. I saved a backup, just in case.”

“If he'd really wanted to forget he would have deleted them himself,” Phaeton said. “You're just as bad as the poor woman who created him. Think of how lonely she must have been to do that.”

Thea looked at Phaeton through a haze of desperation and shock. He was looking at Madame Tussaud, though, and didn't notice. Maybe—maybe they really didn't know, Thea thought.

“Please. He wanted to delete them, but he didn't want to hurt *her*, whoever she is. He never would introduce us. His pain was a product of her own selfishness, it had nothing to do with him. And I don't care how lonely you are, you don't make someone's whole life a lie.” Madame Tussaud's natural color came through beneath the white face powder as he became more impassioned. “I think you're just jealous,” he accused Phaeton.

“Of *Jack*? Please, darling. Never.” Phaeton clenched his lovely jaw.

“Spoken to him recently?” Thea blurted out.

“Jack? No, I haven't seen him since I was put away,” Madame Tussaud said. “Strictly speaking, I'm not allowed to see him. Isn't it horrible? We were very close—”

“Very close' my arse. He rejected you so many times it makes me dizzy to think of it...”

While the lovers were engrossed in their debate, Thea slipped away from the table and out of the ballroom into a dank, close corridor.

The narrow walls and low ceiling comforted Thea somewhat, despite the peeling wallpaper and the smell of old wetness. She changed her clothes into a more practical outfit so she could make herself small: she crouched on her haunches and hugged her legs, biting her knee to keep from sobbing aloud.

A pitifully quiet kean escaped from her mouth as she despaired for Jack, for herself, for all

of the things that lay between them. Things that were sad, things that were beautiful, things that were broken and warped, but most of all things that were loving. All strewn between them like the the pale and twisted bodies of dead soldiers upon a battlefield in the old days.

“Who got dumped this time?” a gruff voice asked from the end of the hall.

“Oh—I'm fine! I'm sorry,” Thea said. She hastily wiped at her nose and rose from her quasi-fetal position. “I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I said I'd stubbed my toe.” She laughed quaveringly. Nobody felt pain here, unless by choice.

“I'm not quite so gullible as all that, I'm afraid.” An old man stood before her. Well, *old-looking*. Thea guessed she was probably older than him. She was older than almost everyone here. He had designed his appearance to resemble the quintessential kindly old man: tweedy, with merry eyes, unruly white hair, and a warm smile beneath a well-kept beard. He looked to Thea like T.H. White. “Anyway,” he said presently, “That lot doesn't consider it a party unless someone's run into the hallway in tears.”

“They seemed very nice,” Thea said politely.

“Oh, they can be,” the man said, his eyes twinkling. “Well, I'm Magus, the horrible host. I'm sure you heard lots of stories about me from my friends in the ballroom.”

“My name is Thea,” she replied.

“Thea! Ah, it makes sense now. I've been expecting you, my dear. Please pardon my befuddlement. So many balls in the air, what? Won't you join me in the study so we can chat?” Magus said, motioning down the hall.

“Oh—alright.”

They turned down another passage on the right and came to a closed door limned in warm yellow light. Magus opened it to reveal a cozy room shaped like a saltine box that had been stood on its end. There was a kettle warming over a fire that was burning merrily in its grate, well-worn chintz chairs, and an outstanding number of books that formed pillars that reached the domed ceiling. An old Victrola played what sounded like Scottish marching songs—lots of bagpipes and drums—and an old beagle raised its head from a homey rug in front of the fireplace. Apparently used to visitors, it laid its head back down and closed its eyes, basking in the flickering warmth.

“Tea?” Magus asked.

“Sure,” Thea said. “Your study is wonderful.”

“Oh dear, it's a horrible mess, but you're kind to say so.” Magus busied himself with the tea, loading the hot water into a chipped porcelain teapot and putting the coronation creamer and a mismatched sugar bowl on the tray. “Oh where *are* those blasted tongs?” he muttered to himself, searching through the drawers of a tall chest. He found bits of twine, an incomplete deck of playing cards, three broken 45 rpm records, a very old scone, broken nibs, yellowing architectural plans, a die, a cat carved out of a potato, lures, and, finally, the blasted tongs.

Soon they were settled in the wonderful chairs—even more comfortable than they looked, Thea noted—and sipping from gold-rimmed teacups.

“I'm a horrible slurper,” Magus said, “You'll have to forgive me.”

“O-of course. I'm so—well, confused. You're not much like the IT people I knew in the old days,” Thea said.

Magus laughed. “No, I'm afraid I'm not. Well, I'm a synthetic who was designed to enjoy my work. I rather think my designer is a bit of an eccentric himself. Anyway, he botched the job—that is to say, I don't dislike being a network administrator, but I'd much rather read in my study with Darwin—” the beagle lifted his head at his name. “Or go foxhunting, what?” Magus sighed. “I expect that's why they call them hobbies, though. You can't possibly suppose they'll pay you for doing something you really *want* to be doing, now can you? The damned economy'd fall right apart, for everyone would be altogether too happy to buy useless things and invest in things that don't exist!” He chuckled at the anachronism of economies. There hadn't been anything

resembling an economy for more than a century.

“I'm looking for someone, Magus,” Thea said slowly.

“Yes, I thought you must be. Looking for your brother, are you?”

“I don't know that I have a right to call him that,” Thea said. She stared into her teacup.

“Well, I'm just law enforcement for the network, aren't I? I'm no moralist, really, so I can't say what's what between you and Jack.” Magus stuffed some tobacco into his meerschaum pipe. “But I can say that all the places I've been, all of the people I've helped, I've noticed one thing about this damned network: there just isn't enough love to go 'round. I'm sure I've read every single shrink's own beastly thesis about why that's so—defamiliarization and all that nonsense—but none of them's come up with a reason good enough for me. What I *do* know is that when you find love, you oughtn't let it go without a damned hard fight.” Streamers of milky blue smoke unwound from the pipe as Magus took his first pull, shaking out the match. Thea stared into the pipe's bowl; as Magus inhaled once more, the tiny red circle in the center of the nest of tobacco expanded to the outer edges, shrinking again as Magus exhaled.

“Do you think he'll ever forgive me?” Thea asked.

“Oh I think so. But never take the word of an eternal optimist, we always manage to get it wrong.” Magus leaned to reach a small leather-bound journal on his desk. After flipping through it for a few moments, he detached a page with the air of a doctor handing his patient an important prescription. “This is the name and network location of a certain locus that appears quite sporadically in the network,” Magus explained. “You'll only have a small window to get in, and you'll need a password, among other things—but the important thing is that you can find Jack in this place, very soon, I think. I wish I had all of the answers for you, Thea.”

Thea took the paper, her eyes scanning it, memorizing before she threw it into the fire. Elysium 1027t20a5u835. “Don't be sorry,” she said. “This is enough to be getting on with. I've got other leads I'm working on.”

“Yes, you would have. Jack wasn't a terribly close friend of mine, but we had some chats, he and I,” Magus said. “He told me ever so much about you.”

Thea stood up abruptly, before she had to hear about what Jack had said. She wasn't ready for that, not yet.

“I'm sorry to leave so suddenly,” Thea said.

“I understand, dear. Good luck.” Magus rose to shake her hand. She surprised both of them by hugging him.

“And give your brother our love, what?”

The red sky made the snow that had fallen on the Eyrie look like pink frosting. Thea couldn't imagine where it had come from—they were well above the clouds. Even though she hadn't been inside for long, a foot of the stuff lay neatly on the cobbles and eaves of the winding street, with not a flurry in sight. Perhaps it was scheduled. Thea stood in the door frame of the tall, black house, beneath the sign that said “ODDITIES.” It was so hard to bring herself to step on the snow when it was pure. Taking in a mouthful of air that was sharp with cold, Thea stepped into the alley. After standing a moment in the utterly silent street, she began the walk back to the Drop; from there, she would find Elysium 1027t20a5u835.