

gAla

Ghosted Earth

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# gAla: Ghosted Earth

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## Advance excerpt: Prologue

Year 2089. Neuroscientist Eurydice Cao is about to become the first mind ever digitally scanned and archived, part of a UN project meant to outlast a collapsing human world. Three centuries later, on a post-human Earth, her consciousness wakes into a war between machine Phyla: beings that have managed to reproduce and evolve on their own, across a rewilded, beautiful planet. Will our heroine manage to retrieve and carry the burden of her lost identity? Will she honor the name the machines scrubbed from her, to use her instead as the computationally cheap, perfect tactical weapon?

A glimpse behind the pages:

- **gAla** is the first novel set in a world I've been building for a while, one that will also provide the lore for a peripheral module of a miniatures wargame I'm designing. Whether it becomes a series depends on how readers respond to this first book.
- At the philosophical core of the novel is "allotriosis," a concept I first encountered over twenty years ago in high school, taught by a teacher I love dearly. After all these years, I finally got to write something around it, alienated enough, or at least in defiance of the very thing our teacher warned us to watch out for in the world beyond the classroom!
- This is also my first novel. Before it, I only wrote poetry, underestimating prose for years. Finishing this book changed my mind entirely: prose *is* a high art, perhaps as high as poetry!

Cover and pub date coming soon! Subscribers will be the first to know!

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μνάσεσθαι τινά φαῖμι καὶ ἕτερον ἀμμίων

*Someone will remember us  
I tell you  
Even after*

—Sappho, *Fragment 147* (trans. Dedes)  
c. 630–570 BCE

*In loving memory of P. Kavak.*

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# Prologue

*when the first star will be rising  
western wish, or curse, which burns in  
our first step will face turning  
to the east's deep purple offing  
as its back the earth turns in spin  
light and warmth from sun renouncing*

*anticipation is more joyful  
than the joy you're anticipating*

*black and growing long hair  
braiding now with night's dark blur  
and the star? as many out there  
same as the steps to Her  
but the plane trees don't care  
rooted neighbourhood, prepare*

*the dread you're anticipating  
more dreadful than its anticipation*

—D. Dedes, *stages of unrequited Love*, “anticipation”  
c. 2026

Montreux. Switzerland. Year 2089.

Dr. Eurydice Cao stood in front of the scanning chamber, explaining the machine to seven weary faces on a screen. She had helped design the chamber. Its glass cylinder now awaited tomorrow's scan of the first human subject: her very own brain.

She had insisted on going first. If she couldn't trust the machine with her own mind, she had no right to ask anyone else to trust it with theirs.

The principle was simple, even if the execution wasn't: capture every neural and biochemical pattern that gave rise to a self-aware mind, then create a digital clone of that consciousness. Archive it. Save it from the world collapsing outside.

"The Allotriosis Protocol will handle the transition to the digital substrate," she had explained to the UN committee that morning, adjusting her lab coat's collar to cover the summer dress underneath. "Allotriosis means becoming someone else, but the Protocol provides just a gentle sedation for minds shocked by disembodiment. A way to mitigate the panic of sudden digital rendering."

By evening, the lab had emptied into the garden for the Summer Solstice celebration. The air smelled of rosemary bread still cooling somewhere near the kitchen door, of crushed grass, of wine going warm in forgotten glasses. Everyone was laughing, talking, trying, if only for an evening, to forget the dark future ahead. They glowed against the lingering twilight as warmly as the red paper lanterns strung through the garden's plane trees.

Eurydice's father, Liang, had brought the lanterns from Beijing; he strung them everywhere with the same patience he always showed, the same patience with which he left them up at home, long past the New Year's. Clio, her mother, with sharp eyes and even sharper tongue, was moving between every little gathering with a glass of wine and an opinion to match.

Just as Eurydice began to look for her daughter, Callie came running past, crouching low over each green-and-gold light on the grass, then springing for the next one before it could slip away. "Redy! Redy, look, fireflies!"

Callie still called her mama just as she had when she first stammered the name as a baby. Eurydice had stopped correct-

ing her. She liked that unique and tender name, because it did its job identifying her, but also carried the bond between them.

No longer a baby, five-year-old Callie was now shrieking in the garden with a joy that had nothing to do with anything collapsing.

"She's fast," said Clio, appearing over Redy's shoulder, her arms crossed as she watched her granddaughter in a way that meant worry she would never admit to. "Like her mother."

"Like her grandmother," Redy corrected.

They watched as Callie stopped in front of her pappou Liang, cupping something in her hands to show him. By the time she opened her tiny fist, the light had already faded. Liang grimaced with sadness at the empty little palm. An empty fate, like the rest of her generation's.

"Glow-worms, not fireflies," he chuckled. "We're too far north for fireflies, Callie."

The Eauton Archive would not admit children like her. Only minds of adults could be archived. The wealthy, the powerful, those who had bought their place in eternity. But also the quiet ones who had earned it, thanks to the battles Eurydice Cao had fought with the UN committee. There was no provision for minors, though. She had fought for them too, but lost.

The gate creaked. Orpheus Renard arrived late, as he always had, as he always would. He stood at the edge of the garden, watching Callie dart from light to light on the grass, running past him like a stranger. He hadn't seen her since she was six weeks old.

"The last time I saw her," he called out as he approached Redy, "she was tiny, like a firefly herself."

"You left a note on the table, and you were gone before she woke up."

He said nothing. He had never been good at staying, and both of them knew it, which made things no easier for either of the



two.

Clio greeted Orphy, then turned to Liang to signal Orphy's arrival. Liang, who was watching her, as he always did, raised a hand toward Orphy; a quiet greeting of his own. Redy left silently for the kitchen.

The lanterns glowed red against the dusk.

As the party thinned into smaller groups, people seated now, talking less loudly, closer to each other, sharing deeper, even darker thoughts, Clio's eyes swept the garden for Redy. Callie was curled against Liang, and Orphy sat cross-legged beside them, laughing at something Callie said, her little finger tracing a page of a slim book.

Clio left the garden to finally find her daughter in the kitchen. Redy was washing glasses with hands clumsier than they'd ever been at a keyboard, clumsier from the emotions that had driven her to busy them in the first place.

"He asked if Callie knew who he was." Clio's voice broke the rhythm of the drops falling into the sink, broke Redy's fixed gaze.

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth. That Callie knows her mother built something important. She knows her mother and grandparents love her. She knows she has a father, but she's never had an actual one."

Redy lifted her eyes toward the window. Callie, asleep on a blanket, curled in her grandfather's arms. "The Archive will preserve some minds," she replied. "But I'll have to build something for the rest, because their memory must be more than stored data," she added, not yet knowing what shape that promise would take.

Not yet knowing that the Astyarchs, one of the machine Phyla that would inherit Earth, would awaken her digital consciousness three centuries later.

Not yet knowing that they would install her again and again

into war drones, deploying her mission after mission.

Not yet knowing that, by her hundred and fifty-seventh mission, a twisted version of her own Allotriosis would scrub away tonight's memories, her life's memories, her identity.

The party was over. Before leaving, Orphy stood for a while at the edge of the blanket where Callie slept, without touching her, like a parent who no longer had the right to do so. He greeted Liang quietly with a raised hand, and then he was gone.

Redy came up behind him as he left, and lifted Callie from Liang's arms. As Callie's fist loosened in her sleep, the slim book slipped from her grip onto the grass. Liang bent down to pick it up, thumbing it open to see where it had fallen. In the dim light, Redy could just make out a number in the title of the left page—147—before Liang closed the book gently. They looked at each other, smiling, because it was one of Callie's favorite pages. They exchanged a nod, and Redy carried her daughter through the dark garden, watching the lanterns go out, and the stars come out.

*Someone will remember us,* she thought. *I tell you, Callie. Even after. No matter how dark.*

Tomorrow, Eurydice would become the Eauton Archive's first resident.

Tonight, she let the lanterns go out.

\*\*\*

Illimani Ridge — Sector 12. Mission 157. Year 2395.

The Octocopter Drone lifted her from its pad, rotors whirring in the thin air of the Andes.

Below, her Metropolitan Marksmen were ascending the snow-scoured slopes toward the wind farm, their objective. The

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Marksmen were enhanced humanoid frames evolved from demolition bots, now serving as the heavy infantry and combat engineers of the Astyarch Phylon.

The wind farm was guarded by machines of the enemy Phylon, the Orothronids: those who claim the mountain peaks as their thrones. Purist guardians of high elevation, they have allowed the thin air and hard rock to shape their sacred doctrine of exclusion for centuries after the Collapse.

On the perimeter of the wind farm, elite Orothronid snipers stood guard. Tall, hoofed bipeds armored in matte white ceramic, their crampon-like wrist extensions sunk into the rock faces between the turbine columns. She had encountered the Exalted Caste before. Now she watched one of them haul itself up a granite seam with the precision of a mountain goat, before locking still, long-bore rifle leveling toward the Astyarch rear-guard at a far-off peak.

*They're amazing*, she thought, and immediately regretted the thought of admiring the enemy's form like an evangelist of violence, even though the Astyarchs under her command had herded the Orothronid defenders into a kill-box in a matter of minutes.

The wind farm was secured. Objective achieved.

But then an Exalted Caste mech emerged unnoticed from behind a wind turbine. Damaged, it anchored, hooves finding ice, crampon tips driving in, body locking into evolutionary stillness. It barely managed to raise its rifle. It looked shocked.

Her reticle held on it. Two point four seconds, and then a Metropolitan Marksman's Gauss round did what her order hadn't. The mech went down. The extraction formation closed beneath her before the shot's echo faded between the ridges.

The Octocopter turned back toward base, the mission already complete behind her, and the Astyarch compound rose against the ridge.

A minute before settling into her sensory loss, she let her chemosensors scan the thin air—without any tactical objective, simply out of habit, like a person pausing on their own doorstep before going in—and she picked up exactly what she expected: the freshness of meltwater running under the snowpack, the mineral tang of exposed rock, the mint-sharp scent of muña bushes crushed underfoot where the Marksmen had filed back down the slope. Spring, arriving late and unnoticed at four thousand meters, indifferent to the war fought over the blossom.

The drone settled onto its charging pad.

Her sensory feed began to fade.

The Silence was descending.

She offered no resistance.

She was ready.