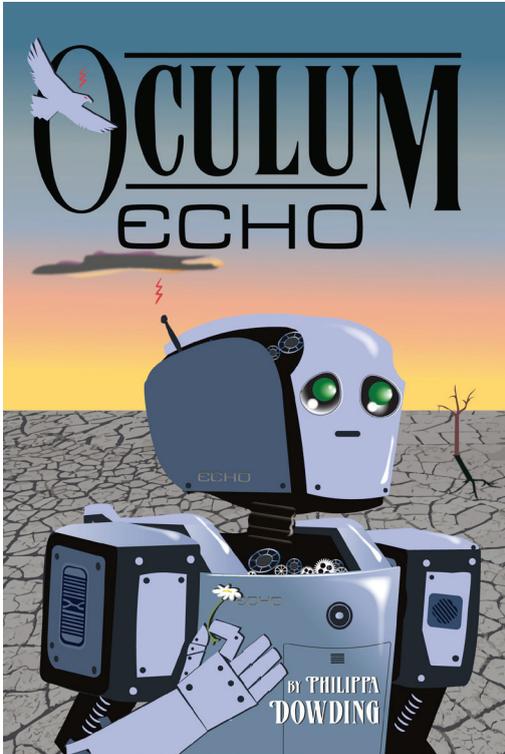


**Excerpt from *Oculum Echo*
by Philippa Dowding**



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ECHO1

Wake, Echo1.

I wake.

Open your eyes, Echo1.

I have eyes. I open them. Light.

Now try your hand, Echo1.

I lift my hand. I have never had a hand before.

The voice in my head speaks again, *Hello, Echo1. This is Guide.*

Are you ready?

Yes, Guide, I am ready.

I can answer Guide inside my head!

Then there are more instructions from Guide, the voice in my head.

Find your feet, Echo1.

I lift my boot.

I take two shaky steps.

Jump, Echo1.

I jump.

Touch your nose, Echo1.

I touch my finger to my nose.

Speak out loud, Echo1.

I say, "Call me Echo."

Then I do many physical and mental tasks, as Guide requests.

When I am found to be functioning well, Guide says, *Echo1, are you ready for your journey?*

Yes, Guide, I am ready, I answer in my head.

Then step outside and leave your outpost, Echo1.

I open the door. I step outside. It is very different from inside.

There are trees, a small mountain, and clouds in the sky above me. I blink in the sunlight. My outpost is a hard, domed metal shell

slightly larger than me.

The silver letters above the door read “ECHO1.”

There are many words and ideas that I understand, but I also have many questions for Guide.

Guide, how long have I been asleep?

Guide answers, *Eighty-three years.*

Who put me here?

Guide answers again, *The Makers.*

Where am I?

Guide says, *Your birthplace, the ECHO1 outpost.*

What am I?

Guide doesn't answer right away, then says, *You are a creation, but what you become is up to you, Echo1. You will learn as you go. I will help you.*

Am I alive?

Guide pauses again but finally says, *You have free will, Echo1. You decide what a life is, and what to do with yours.*

Suddenly, the top of the outpost opens, and a creature rises and hovers above me. It has wings, eyes, a beak.

Guide says, *Echo1, meet Peregrine1. She looks like a falcon, but she is your video drone.*

The video drone falcon speaks in my head, *I am Peregrine1. Are you Echo1?*

I answer her in my head, Hello, Peregrine1. Yes, I am Echo1.

Peregrine1 flies into the sky, then hovers high above me.

Echo1, P1 has sent you video. Do you accept?

Yes, I accept.

Suddenly, an image fills my head.

It is me, Echo.

I raise my hand, and in the video I raise my hand too. Peregrine1 has sent me video of myself from where she is, high above me.

I see myself, and I am Echo.

Guide says, *Peregrine1 to Echo1, Video Test link complete. Time to go. Before we leave your outpost, you must receive your purpose. Are you ready for your purpose, Echo1?*

Yes, Guide, I am ready.

Echo1, here is your purpose: You will follow the beacons to each of the four great domes of Oculum. Together, you and Peregrine1 will record all that you see. I will be with you, but only you can hear me. You may ask me any question you wish, and I will answer you. You will check on the earth, the children, humanity, and the four domes of Oculum. You will search until you find the First One, and then you will ask The Question. This is your purpose, Echo1. Do you understand?

Yes, I understand. I think. Do I?

Guide says, *You will. It's time to go. Say goodbye to your outpost, Echo1. Then call the first dome.*

I turn away from the outpost. Goodbye, birthplace.

I send out my call: ECHO1! ECHO1! ECHO1!

Faintly, a moment later, I hear the answer.

PING! OCULUM1!

Far away, the beacon of the first dome is working.

The OCULUM1 dome is east. A long way, many weeks on foot.

I turn my back on my outpost and take the first steps of my journey. Peregrine1 flies high above. We will walk a long way together, Peregrine1, Guide, and Echo.

I have my purpose, and the children of the four great domes of Oculum wait.