

Valhalla

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Exposition

Echo held on tight to Aeryn as the railway curved around the west side of the city. Aeryn couldn't sit still. She jumped from the safety of Echo's lap and pressed her nose to the window. "Mama look, mama look," she exclaimed. "The tree building!" Echo smiled thoughtfully. It had only been a few months since Aeryn had called her mama. She never thought she would be anyone's mom, let alone have to raise her brother's only child after he got hit by a car a year ago.

"That's Valhalla baby girl," replied Echo. "One day we'll all go to Valhalla." The railway makes a quick turn and Aeryn stumbles back into Echo's lap.

"What's Valhalla?" Aeryn asked as she climbed back into her aunt's arms.

"Valhalla is where we return to the Earth. H2H built it many years ago, back when the Earth was sick. We weren't doing a very good job of taking care of the planet. People got sick and the air was very dirty. H2H helped us make it better."

"Will I go to Valhalla?" Aeryn asked with wide eyes.

"One day, but not for a long time."

After Echo dropped off Aeryn at the hospital daycare, she heads to her office on the 14th floor. As she walked in, she heard, "You have one new message." Her stomach sank.

Inciting Incident

Unable to concentrate all morning, Echo headed across the street to Jiji's Cafe to grab a bite. She peeked past the host stand and sidled up behind the only woman at the bar. Echo lowered her voice, "Is this seat taken?" The woman turned, her scowl quickly turning to a grin,

"Stop messing with me Echo." Echo laughed and sat down next to her best friend and neighbor, Yooly. Echo couldn't take her anxiety any longer.

"I've got Parkinson's," she said, looking straight into Yooly's eyes. "You know what that means." Yooly wrapped her arms around her dear friend and they sat there, holding each other. The sound of gunshots startles the women as they turn to see the tv above the bar. It was the Naturalists in the news again. Always causing trouble demanding an uprising against H2H. Echo looked at Yooly. "I don't want to go to Valhalla. What about Aeryn?"

"You know we are family, right?" Yooly reassured her. Echo put her head in her hands.

"I know, I know, but she's been through so much. It's just not fair. Maybe the Naturalists are right."

"Stop that nonsense," Yooly replied. "H2H has saved us from ourselves. We all must go to Valhalla when our time comes. I know you are sad to leave Aeryn, but you will get to go to a better place, and she will go there too one day." Yooly glanced at the clock on the wall. "Hang on Echo, I've got to check the meter, I'll be right back. . . . Hey, it's gonna be ok."

As Echo studies the menu, a tall man with dark shaggy hair comes to sit next to her.

"The Naturalists are good people," he says. Echo didn't respond. "If you don't want to go to Valhalla, you don't have to." Echo looks up, curious. The man looked her in the eye. "H2H isn't what we think it is and it's time we took back control. Come to the Metro site on Seventh tonight at 9 and see for yourself. Put this on before you leave." He placed a smooth metal ring on the counter next to her hand. There was a light pulsing from inside. Echo holds it in her hand. "Who are you?" she asked as she looked up, but the man was gone. She sees Yooly headed back in the restaurant and slips the ring into her pocket.

Rising Action

That guy's insane... Yooly's right, I am overthinking all this... it's all just a crazy conspiracy theory, right? Echo thinks to herself as she rubbed the ring inside her pocket, having yet to put it on. She had to get back to work, but she couldn't stop thinking about the strange man. And the ring. She decided to put it on. She immediately noticed a change in the world around her...and that strange humming sound, the sound that had always been there, radiating from the city center, disappeared. It was a type of sound that everyone had learned to live with and eventually ignored. What used to cause her headaches as a child was now gone, and she now had a strangely familiar sense of clarity as she looked around. She noticed the grass along the sidewalk that was once a bright green littered with various colorful flowers had now turned into a gray mound of gravel. The warm trees that made this route of hers such a pleasant part of her day didn't look like trees at all, and in fact, appeared to resemble radio towers instead. *Metal tubes... with wire antennas? Something's not right here...* She pulled the ring from her finger and slipped it back into her pocket. Everything seemed familiar again and she headed back to work trying to process what just happened.

After work, Echo took Aeryn to Yooly's place and asked her to watch her for a few hours. Echo put on the ring and headed out. When she arrived at the Metro site, the man from the cafe was there with a group of 20 or so other people. They all seem to be listening to him speak. A woman walked over to her and said, "You must be Echo, we've been waiting for you."

"Who is that man?" asked Echo.

"That's Loqi," the woman responded, "You will get to know him soon." Echo listened as Loqi spoke to the group.

"The time has come. Two weeks from now we will regain our rights as humans and expose the true nature of H2H." Loqi introduced Echo, who looked up with surprise. At the end of the meeting, Loqi asked if he could walk her home. While they were walking, he tells her that he knows she is going to be sent to Valhalla and that he has a code that will help destroy H2H. "My grandfather was an engineer who helped build Valhalla. I've been gradually hacking the system and some things just don't add up. I need your help accessing Valhalla. Will you join the revolt?" Echo asked if she could sleep on it and tell him the next day. When Echo arrived at home, Yooly was sleeping on the couch. She woke her up and thanked her for looking after her niece. Yooly, being half-awake, grunted and shuffled out the door to her own unit. Echo tiptoed into her niece's room and watched her peacefully sleep. She kissed her forehead while her eyes started to sting. Valhalla had taken so much from Aeryn's life; she couldn't lose another loved one. She decided then to join the revolt and take down Valhalla.

Climax

(2 weeks later)

On the day of her ascent to Valhalla, Yooly gifted her a handmade flower crown. "Oh, isn't it beautiful? I heard that H2H loves flowers." Yooly said excitedly. Echo kept the crown on for the sake of Yooly. Echo convinced her niece and Yooly to stay at home that day, she didn't want them to travel to Valhalla with her. Echo said her goodbyes and headed to the city center.

Echo had never been this close to Valhalla. The windowless building was impeccably white. There was only one narrow walkway up to the entrance with crystal clear water surrounding it. A large V engraved into the building sat above the entrance. She hid the ring in the flower crown and remembered the instructions Loqi told her. While taking a deep breath in, she began walking down the long walkway. She heard the peaceful water trickling and the pulsating hum of the Valhalla; she realized the pulsating hum was matching with her heartbeat. Once she reached the entrance the H2H auto scanned her identity. "Welcome, Echo. I've been

waiting for you. Please come inside.” said H2H. All of a sudden, a door appeared out of the white building and she was able to enter.

With Loqi’s ring carefully hidden, Echo entered Valhalla only to witness a truly spectacular sight: a vast single room with patches of green grass, moss-covered walls, and streams of crystal clear water flowing into the center; a true harmony between nature and technology. In the center, the giant tree extended all the way to the sky until human eyes could no longer perceive detail due to such great heights. There was nobody else inside, alluding to the fact that this was Echo’s special day; that she was “chosen.” She could see rows and rows of floors stretching all the way to the top of the building though it’s not clear what else remained to be discovered within the building. All she knew was that it must be destroyed. “I must not get distracted,” Echo thought to herself. As she put the ring on, Echo noticed the plants and the grass did not disappear, for this must be the only area where life could truly flourish. At the base of the tree, a small room-like structure had been carved out, leaving a single chair waiting for her. “Welcome to your moment, Echo,” a calm yet bellowing voice said to her, “I am H2H and I’m here to bring you to your true purpose. It’s time to serve the planet and fulfill your destiny. Have a seat.” The AI’s voice reverberated throughout the entire interior.

Echo sat in the chair, and thanks to her ring, she was able to see the vague lining of what appeared to be a hidden panel on the floor. Without hesitation, Echo jumped from her seat and began using her nails to pry open the access panel, revealing a crude computer screen and a set of QWERTY keys lined up next to it. “Could this be an actual keyboard? Nobody has seen or used these in decades! Just as Loqi said!” Echo thought with astonishment. She frantically typed in the code beginning the self-destruct sequence Loqi’s grandfather added in secrecy just in case the system became too powerful. Everything goes black. Alarms sound. Echo panics. Through the darkness, Echo could make out the faint glow of another door off to the side, previously hidden from sight. She rushed towards it. Upon opening it, she encountered a huge hallway, appearing to be some type of research lab. Stretched out upon metallic countertops were human bodies. In the other corner, she sees what looks like a machine half-covered in human skin. Loqi was right, she thought. Loqi breaks open the door and leads her back to the atrium that is now full of the Naturalists. Together they storm the facility, live broadcasting to the city over disrupting all streaming devices. They break into the research labs and expose H2H’s true intentions to eradicate humankind.

Falling Action

Crowds gathered in the streets. Riots started to break out. Humans ripped their H2H hubs from their walls. The city was in chaos. Over the coming months and years, the revolt spread from city to city as the humans slowly removed technology from their daily lives.

Denouement

(50 years later)

Aeryn sat back in the hand-carved oak chair feeling the heat from the wood fire dance across her face while she looked at the stars. The sound of children's excited voices and little feet approached her. They gathered around the fire, sitting on oak benches. Aeryn smiled warmly, "Hello little ones, ready for storytime?". The children wiggled around on the benches in excitement and shouted,

"Yes!!"

"Okay get warm and cozy because tonight I will tell you about Valhalla," Aeryn said and the children giggled and repeated the word, "Valhall Llaaaa". A wide-eyed little boy piped up,

"Isn't that the building with the giant tree that was controlled by a computer?". Aeryn replied,

"Yes, that's right". Another child confused asked,

"What's a computer?"