

Excerpt from Chapter 1, Section 12: "END AND BEGINNING"

Julia sat on her ergometer and pedaled eagerly, still trying to make up for her slip. Her power production was now far into the green zone.

A message popped up in front of her: "We're at the lake, want to come?"

Julia continued to pedal, then thought twice and got off the ergometer. She went to her desk. She lifted the VR goggles up and put them on.

"Activate Elysium! To the lakeshore! Last location!"

A FLASH...

This time her avatar showed up on the shore of a large lake. The idyllic lake was beneath a blue sky and surrounded by green hills, small bays, gentle meadows and beaches, and colorful birds. A paradise. Julia spotted her friends and ran to them.

"Well, what's up?" Sven asked.

"Was on the ergo," Julia replied.

"You're being really busy lately," Bian teased. "Probably afraid they won't let you out of the comb."

Julia gave her the finger. Then she sat down with the others and looked out at the beautiful sight. They were silent for a while.

"I wonder if there's anything like that in reality," Julia thought aloud.

Fatma shrugged. "I don't know. We'll find out soon enough. When do you turn eighteen?"

"Two months," Julia replied, smiling. "I can't wait."

"It's my turn in three months," Fatma added. "We'll all..."

"Svenie will surely be sad then because he won't be allowed to pedal anymore," Orhan mocked.

"You dumbass." Sven tried to punch Orhan in the arm. Orhan dodged him and grinned.

"We'll all turn eighteen this year," Fatma finished her sentence. "I can't wait to see what life is like on the outside."

"Yeah, me too," Julia agreed. "That's going to be really cool when we meet each other in person for the first time. For real, I mean! We could really be together then."

Bian, on the other hand, was not infected by these musings. "Life in the comb also has its advantages. If I'm not in the mood for you anymore, I go offline — and I'm rid of you."

Everyone looked at her in amazement.

"Sheesh!" Emilia and Fatma replied as if from one mouth.

Bian grinned, satisfied that her provocation had worked out again. They were silent for a moment and looked into the evening sun. They knew it was fake, of course, but they enjoyed the view anyway.

Emilia looked finally at Julia. "Do you think it's so different? I mean, meeting for real? In person?"

Julia turned to her. "Sure! Don't you remember what it was like when we still lived with our mothers?"

"Yes, I do," Fatma nodded pensively.

All of them dwelled on their memories for a while.

Finally, Emilia broke the silence. "I can't wait to see where they'll send us."

"Maybe we can even work together," Julia hoped.

"I'm not so sure about that," Bian interjected.

"Why?" Orhan asked.

“Because Julia keeps producing too little electricity and will probably screw it up.”

Fatma came to Julia's defense. “Bian, don't be so bitchy!”

“Maybe she won't even be allowed out!” Bian grinned at Julia.

Julia moved to rise, but Emilia put her hand on Julia's shoulder.

“Julia, stay cool. She doesn't mean it.”

“Of course, I mean it!” Bian confirmed. “You're just passing off!”

Now Julia jumped up.

Then suddenly the Elysium collapsed...

...and Julia was back in her comb.

But this time things were completely different. The room was pitch black and almost absolutely silent. The only sound Julia could still hear was her own breathing.

“What are you doing? Lights on!” Julia ordered.

No reaction.

“Lights on! I've produced enough power. I'm way in the green!”

Nothing. No answer, no reaction, no light.

“Lights on! What's going on? Why won't you respond?”

The room remained silent, the light stayed off.

“Help!” Julia cried timidly. “Speak to me!”

Nothing.

“LIGHTS! ON! LIGHTS! ON!” Julia screamed as loud as she could.

Nothing.

“HELP! HELP ME! ANYBODY HELP ME!”

No reaction. Her panicked cry went unheard. The room remained completely dark and silent. Julia heard only her own gasping breath and her heart pounding loudly. She sank down to the floor.

“Mama!” Julia softly sobbed at last. “Mama!”