

The Elsiyum Project

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Chapter 1

I looked out of the window, thinking about the scenery of the distant planet Styx. I had been born there and had grown up with its ever-present twilight. My entire species, the stygian, was perfectly adapted to their dimly lit environment. Every feature, from our large, light-sensitive eyes to our animal-like faces, our glowing antennae, and our dextrous paws, ensured that we were comfortable in our natural habitat. The humans, who live there, are less adapted and mostly stay inside. None of the stygians mind the humans because they were kind of just there.

I pulled myself back to reality and swept my eyes around the crowded room, tracing back to how I had ended up here. A few days prior, I had found a flyer for a job offer at a research facility. I had just outgrown the title of “child”, so a job was just what I needed to prove myself. As fast as my nimble legs could take me, I bolted to my house to grab all my stuff. I carefully placed my favorite gadgets and tools, plus the necessities, into my bag. Before I left, I left a note for my roommate Piru to tell him I was going. Piru is about my age, and after we both turned 14, we moved in together according to Stygian tradition. I was sad to leave my best friend, but I couldn't pass this up. Now with a full bag, I walked to the transit station and got on the shuttle to the planet Aaru where the facility was supposed to be.

The ride was long and noisy, but food and blankets were provided, and I had plenty of kinks to work out of my gadgets. I kept accidentally zapping myself while fixing my stun gloves. I got quite a few weird looks. Eventually, I made it to the station, which was conveniently a short walk away from the facility. On my way over there, I was taken aback by the brightest thing I had ever seen. It looked like the sky was starting to catch fire! Now I know that's called a sunrise, but it took me a few minutes to adjust to the light. I couldn't understand how humans like that for the life of me! I entered the packed facility waiting room and... I found myself back in the present. As soon as I had finished my train of thought, I heard someone call my name in stygian, a welcome sound after being surrounded by people who didn't speak my language.

I walked to the reception area marked “Stygian Applicants” in the choppy stygian script. A smiling stygian woman sat behind the desk and gave me a form to fill out.

Name: Pix

Age(in human years): 15

Skills: analytics, engineering, math

Serious Medical Conditions: none

Things to the like of that. After I turned in the form, she handed me a smooth metal collar that looked too big and told me to put it around my neck. I will admit I was scared. What if they used it to control me, shock me if I stepped out of line, or keep me here forever? I

decided that their intentions couldn't be that bad. I strapped it onto my neck and the only thing I felt was the cold metal against my fur. No sooner did my hands leave the clasp that it tightened to a comfortable fit. I tried to say something to the receptionist, but instead of the familiar rumbles of Stygian, I said it in human! To my surprise, I could actually understand what I was saying. In my newfound human voice, I said

“This Is a translator!”

The receptionist nodded and handed me a card with three purple dots. “In the next room, stand here,” she said with a blinding lack of detail, then ushered me into the aforementioned room. It was larger with alcoves in the floor, each with a few steps leading in, a wrap-around couch, and a circular metal table. I noticed that each sofa was color coordinated and each table had a number of dots from one to three. I navigated through the room, careful not to step into any of the floor holes. Soon I found the area for purple three, but was a bit confused to see two other people there. Never one to question the authority, I lowered myself into the shallow pit and sat an appropriate distance from the others.

One of them was a wiry human boy, around my age, with hair the color of wet sand falling into his eyes. His orange-brown eyes were darting around, presumably sizing me up. The other was also human, a girl this time. She was more athletic looking, and around a year older, with frey red, shaggy hair. She wore a pair of overalls with a star patch on the front pocket. The boy was the first to speak

“Hi. My name is Spiro, and the tired-looking one is Lana”

“Hey!” Lana retorted back, slamming her hands on the table and making it rattle “I’m just put off from all this space travel!”

SPIRO: “I get it, you’re adjusting from the long trip from Earth, But I got on at the next stop and I’m fine!”

LANA: “Cool it, Martian. The new guy’s looking intimidated. He hasn’t gotten a chance to say anything thanks to your rambling!” She leaned back, clearly exasperated by Spiro’s nonsense. “The floor is yours, fuzzball”

PIX: “My name Is Pix. I am not from here. It is very bright in this room” I didn’t intend to sound so awkward when I said that, but apparently, it passed as sounding almost normal with the translator.

SPIRO: “It definitely looks like you’re not from our solar system, but where are you from?”

PIX: “Styx. It has a similar time system to your planets, but It has no sunrise. No one knows why. It’s called the twilight planet sometimes for its low light conditions. I’m more curious about Earth, though. What is it like there? In detail, please.”

LANA: “Ok? You probably know how the Hyperians landed there in 1942 and triggered another industrial revolution, space exploration, new energy sources, yadda yadda. I’m from a place there called Alaska. The nature there is really pretty. Currently, on Earth, it’s 1992.”

I wrote down bullet-point facts from what she said just in case I would need earth

knowledge later. Suddenly, a voice came from speakers in the room and blared: "ATTENTION APPLICANTS. YOU HAVE ALL BEEN CATEGORIZED INTO TEAMS. REMAIN SEATED."

With a hissing noise, the couch alcoves in the floor started to descend further and further until we could see the well-lit shaft of an elevator.

PIX: "Fascinating! But it's a little bright for my taste"

LANA: "It's just an elevator, pix. It's an alternative to stairs"

PIX: "I know that!" I huffed.

Suddenly, The elevator began to move sideways, stopping shortly after. The doors opened noiselessly to reveal a purple-carpeted hallway. The voice chimed up again "GREETINGS, PURPLE THREE. PROCEED TO YOUR LEFT UNTIL YOU REACH THE DOOR MARKED WITH THREE DOTS. EXIT THE VEHICLE" Spiro stepped out of the elevator first, then Lana had to help me out. We realized we had gone the wrong way when we reached Blue One, and we turned around to go the right way. Eventually, we reached Purple Three and to everyone's surprise, the door unlocked when Spiro touched the handle.

PIX: "Fingerprint recognition! I think I like it here!"

Behind the door, there was a short hallway with two doors with small chalkboards hanging from hooks: One marked "Lana" and the other marked "Pix and Spiro".

LANA: "Are these like dorm rooms?"

SPIRO: "No, they're refrigerators"(with incredible sarcasm) With little warning, Lana elbowed Spiro in the stomach and disappeared into her door with a "You're such a moron"

I was the first to step into my door, and I was surprised to see a decently sized apartment with a small kitchen, sofa, and a bookshelf, all various shades of purple. There were two doors next to each other, with my name in Stygian and Spiro's in Martian. I was almost unable to keep myself from squealing in excitement when I entered my room, a near-perfect replica of my room back on Styx. Everything was there: My hammock, my desk, and the box where I stored my components. The only thing missing was

PIX: "Piru. I hope he got my note..."

While I was thinking of notes, I noticed a slip of paper on my desk reading:

Welcome to your room, Pix!

It would be advisable to get some rest and learn more about your roommate.

Tomorrow your team will be put through trials to test your eligibility to our program. If you succeed In all three, you will be offered the job. If you fail, you will be sent back to your homeworld. If you wish to talk to a staff member, there is a communicator in your foyer. Best of luck, Pix of purple three.

I didn't know exactly what to do, so I did what came naturally and began to work on a new invention that would allow me to control the lights in any room. Halfway into soldering the wiring in place on my Dim jammer, I heard Spiro calling me out of my room. When I came in, the lights were a little bright, but Spiro had set out various bags

and boxes of human snacks on the smooth table.

SPIRO: "Hey Pix! I thought we could hang out and get to know each other!"

PIX: "What is this food?"

SPIRO: "Chips and stuff from Mars. Try these. They're my favorite!" He held out a white bag with curly-looking things inside, along with a small packet that read "Silica gel" and "Do not eat". For me, those things didn't belong in the same sentence, and I ripped open the packet.

SPIRO: "Dude! What are you doing? That's a silica packet!"

PIX: "I know what it is. And I'm eating it?"

SPIRO: "Why? It's poisonous!"

PIX: "Maybe to humans, but silicon is an essential nutrient to Stygians. Silica gel is a sort of candy, normally."

I poured the contents of the packet into my mouth, and it tasted familiar. Spiro looked worried, but eventually, he realized that I was going to be okay. As the night passed, I was really glad to have someone to talk to. It took away my worries about whatever was coming tomorrow.

Chapter 2

That morning, I was pulled out of what little sleep I got by a sudden flash of bright light. Once my eyes adjusted, I saw Spiro, hand on the light switch, grinning. SPIRO: Gotta go soon, buddy. Sorry to wake you, but we can't be late! You gotta wear this though.

He tossed me a cloth armband with three purple dots and then left the room. I hurriedly threw on an outfit suitable for trials. A shirt without sleeves, a pair of shorts, kneepads, and some leg socks. By the time I was done and came out all ready, Spiro had to shove me out of the door. We met Lana in the elevator, which without us having to press any buttons whisked us away to another floor. The doors slid open with a pneumatic hiss, revealing a room with circles on the floor, each numbered and colored accordingly. We shuffled to the "purple 3" circle, and I sized up the teams surrounding us. There was Blue 2, made up of two rowdy-looking human boys and a girl stygian. To our left, a pink-haired human girl was lost in conversation with a tall, dark-skinned human boy. Standing with them in the red 1 area was a girl I could only assume to be a starfolk, an elusive race of slightly humanesque people, who can live in the vacuum of space. I decided to go and talk to them, but when my paw reached the edge of our circle, a forcefield appeared and a tinny voice chimed "Please stay in your circle until directives are given"