

# Vibration

Eliel Guzman

**First Place**, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2026 Young Writers' Contest  
High Point High School—Beltsville, MD  
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My name is Alexander. Most people only ever used it to point me out, like I was some damn landmark for their own cruelty. “Yo, there’s Alexander!” they’d shout. It was always a show, the giggling, the sharp scoffs, the elbowing as they rushed past me in the hall.

“Bet he trips again,” one of them said.

“Bet those legs just give up.”

My chest didn’t just tighten, it felt like a rib had cracked and was pressing into my lung. My ears ran with a thin, high-pitched buzz that made everything else vanish. My hoodie, usually my safe space, felt like wet wool dragged straight from a frozen lake, pulling me down. So, I obey, I shrank, walk light, talk soft, breathe quiet. If I didn’t take up space, maybe they’d forget I existed.

Ten years of this. Ten years of being a joke I never knew started. A whisper in the back of class. A shadow that didn’t even match the person casting it.

Once, I got beat up because I walked weird. They didn’t see the effort, only the deviation. They had no clue my body was already a battlefield of cells fighting wars I couldn’t even name. Acute Myeloid Leukemia, Rhabdomyosarcoma, saying that second one still trips me up, it feels like chewing glass. Words like that? Monsters. Polysyllabic, jagged things that could break your spirit before you even tried to own them. I never told anyone, pity was worse than pain, I’d rather be hated for being broken and different than treated like some hero for being sick.

Then Chris came.

He didn’t sit by me because he had to. He just... sat.

“Mind if I?” he asked, his hand hovering over the scarred wood of my empty desk

I nodded, throat tight, heart hammering like a drumline, all confused. He saw stuff everyone else ignored, a smudge of graphite that looked like a tiny galaxy, or a shoe. The way I always rescued that one crooked pencil from the floor with no eraser and bite marks. Little, normal human stuff. For a second, the storm in my head cleared. I laughed. I talked. I forgot the art of disappearing.

After one brutal Tuesday, the kind where the air felt like lead, Chris was gone. His chair was a gaping hole. The halls felt tighter, the laughter sharper, and the mimicry of my limp was crueler than usual. I got home, bones screaming, marrow aching. I grabbed La Chitarra, an Epiphone PR-350 acoustic guitar. Old, bruised, and beat up, a gift from my deceased father. It was the only thing that never whispered behind my back.

I didn’t just play, I attacked, I strummed with jagged, violent energy, pouring every unsaid scream into the strings. My fingertips burned raw.

Snap.

The high E-string snapped back like a whip. I didn’t flinch, I looked at it and shrugged. “Just a stupid guitar,” I muttered.

But then, the wood hummed. Not music, but a faint, tired vibration.

“Alexander...” it rasped. The voice was like dry leaves skittering across concrete. “Care for me, chamaco.”

I turned it away. I chose silence.

“Go ahead, chamaco, keep ignoring me... but someday you won’t be able to miss it, eh.”

The next day, the A-string snapped. Then a hairline fracture crawled near the bridge. I didn’t ease up. I pressed harder, punished it for being fragile like me. My fingers bled, the fretboard speckled with tiny dark blooms. The guitar’s voice grew weaker, more desperate.

“Ay mijo... Careful, you won’t listen to me,” It said, whispering.

“Shut up!” I snapped, my voice cracking in the empty room. Bitterness coated my tongue like copper. “Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

I shoved the guitar away, letting it thud against the mattress. I pressed my palms into my eyes until I saw stars, my heart hammering against my ribs.

“Why am I talking to a guitar?” I whispered to the shadows. “Am I going crazy? Is this it? Is the fever back?” I looked at my hands, shaking and stained with small dots of red. “It’s literally just wood and strings. Glue and lacquer. It’s a thing. It’s just a thing.”

But the air in the room didn’t feel empty. It felt heavy, like the silence was leaning in to hear what I’d say next.

“I don’t care,” I hissed, grabbing the neck again. I didn’t care about the wood, or the gift, or the ghost of my father that seemed to linger in the curve of the body. I used the guitar like a lightning rod for the rage and the exhaustion. I ignored the soul underneath.

Patient at first. Then strained. Then... silent.

The last string broke on Tuesday night. The G string snapped with a crack like a bone, whipping across my palm. Thin red line. The sound hole felt like an open mouth, gasping.

The next morning, I did something I never do. I went out. I walked into a Guitar Center, my hoodie pulled low, my heart doing that nervous skitter against my ribs. I didn’t ask for help. I just looked at the wall of colorful packs until I found what Google had recommended: D’Addario EJ11 80/20 Bronze.

I’m pretty sure the cashier didn’t even see my face. I paid, gripped the plastic bag like a lifeline, and retreated back to my room.

I cradled the guitar, gentle now. I cleaned the blood and dust from the fretboard. My hands shook as I tried to remember the YouTube tutorials, threading the bronze wire through the bridge and winding it around the pegs. I over wrapped a few, and the loops looked messy, nothing like the clean factory wind they had before.

I plucked the low E. It buzzed a little, hitting a fret. I sighed, wiping a smudge of grease off the wood.

“Not perfect,” I whispered, “but it’ll do.”

I leaned down at it, my forehead resting against the grain, and whispered into the sound hole.

“Listen, La Chitarra,” I breathed. “Forgive these restless hands that turned you into mush when you wanted songs. Forgive the bitter words I threw like stones, the careless laughter, the cruel jokes about your Mexican accent.”

I closed my eyes, the smell of lemon oil and old wood filling my senses.

“You were never just wood and strings to me. You were breath when mine grew heavy. You were warmth when the world felt cold. I care for you, my dear guitar. I never meant to wound the one thing that carried my heart when I could not carry it myself.”

A single tear hit the bridge, shimmering like a bead of glass.

“You are my path, my quiet compass, my friend. I would move heaven and earth for you, mi amigo. I would cross silence itself just to hear your strings speak again. And I’m sorry. Truly, deeply sorry.”

The room felt incredibly still.

“Sorry for the anger. Sorry for the noises. Sorry for the moments I chose my pain instead of your music. But most of all...” I swallowed hard, the words barely a ghost of sound. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen,”

A faint, warm vibration hummed against my chest. It wasn’t just a sound, it was a feeling, like a steady heartbeat syncing up with my own.

“It is okay, chamaco,” the guitar rasped, the voice no longer like dry leaves, but like the low, deep thrum of a cello. “I understand the pain. I know... I know a soul cannot handle it all by itself. It is too much weight for one set of shoulders.”

The wood felt warm against my palms, almost like it was leaning back into my touch.

“I forgive you for finally listening,” it whispered. “You are here now. That is what matters.”

I stayed frozen, my forehead still pressed to the scarred spruce top. The words hit me harder than any insult in the hallway ever could. A cold realization washed over me, sharper than the snap of a high E-string.

I had been acting just like them.

The kids in the hall, the ones who pointed and laughed, the ones who saw “broken” and decided to break it further. I had done the exact same thing to the only piece of my father I had left. I had become the jerk of the school in my own bedroom. I had become what I hated most.

The guilt was a physical weight, pressing down on my lungs until I could barely breathe. But beneath the guilt, there was a strange, sudden peace. The war was over. I didn’t have to fight the guitar anymore. I didn’t have to fight myself.

The exhaustion hit then, slamming into me like a physical truck. My muscles turned to lead, and the adrenaline that had kept me upright for days simply evaporated.

I sank to the floor, my hand pressed hard against my chest, feeling the steady thump-thump of my heart. I didn’t let go. I pulled La Chitarra close, cradling it like a shield, and felt its wooden body holding onto me just as tightly.

I woke up somewhere that wasn’t in my room, it was a cathedral of memories. Hallways, lockers, and even parts of my kitchen floated weightlessly. Chris was in a shard to my left, laughing at a joke I’d never heard. There was me, running without a limp, sun on my face. Then me again, a shadow, huddled and invisible.

La Chitarra floated beside me, whole, glowing amber, and perfect.

“Is this where I stay? Did I die? Is this really heaven?” I asked, my voice echoing off the glass. “No pain?”

“No pain,” it whispered, a chord of a thousand strings. “But no echo. You’re not meant to remain. If you stay, you stop being real. You become a photo. A memory. Silent. Still.”

I looked at the shard of Chris. An empty seat. Lost, distant laughing. Ice shards on my skin. “Does he know I’m gone?”

“He feels the silence you left behind,” said the guitar, its amber light pulsing. “Your absence changes the world frequency.”

I sobbed, ugly and raw. “I’m so sick and tired. I don’t want the wars anymore! I don’t want to be the joke anymore.”

“I know,” it said, leaning close. “Music isn’t in the perfect note. It’s in vibration. Survival. You are here. That’s the only note that matters.”

The glass sky cracked. Blinking light poured through. I woke up gasping. The air tasted like dust and reality. La Chitarra was pressed to my chest, its new D'Addario strings humming faint against my heartbeat. Warm. Soothing.

Bones ached. Hands shook. My chest was tight. The room was ordinary, messy, and dim. I breathed. One. Two. Slowly. I turned the first string.

Plink.

Weak. Unsteady. Alive. I exhaled loud in the quiet.

Tomorrow? The hallways would still be a warzone. The laughter would still be rising. People would still be rising. People would still be waiting to see me trip. The storm wouldn't wait for me.

But I'm here. Breathing. Vibration.

I strummed a soft chord. It was fragile and faint, but it held against the silence.

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*First Place*

**"Vibration"**

Eliel Guzman

High Point High School—Beltsville, MD

*Second Place*

**"On the 2082 Piracy Case"**

Ferris McDermott

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

*Third Place*

**"One Small Step"**

DeRique Smith

Frederick, MD

*Honorable Mention*

**"FairyTech Blogspace"**

Maya Liawanag

Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

*Honorable Mention*

**"The Wanderer"**

Rokhaya Lo

Randallstown High School—Randallstown, MD

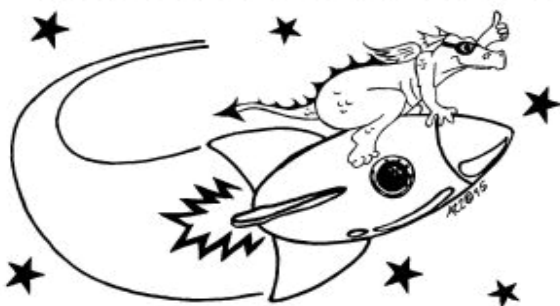
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# On the 2082 Piracy Case

Ferris McDermott

Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2026 Young Writers' Contest

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The following is an analysis of various materials relating to the Autonomous Transport Vehicle (herein "ATV") "Rockefeller" Piracy Case of 2082. Compiled and annotated by contributors to the Wright-Saldys Journal of Astropolitics from 2091 to 2095.

## **Background:**

The solar system of the late 21st Century is a complicated tangle of alliances, trade agreements, and conglomerates stretching from Mercury to Saturn, as Humanity has only begun to explore the Ice Giants and beyond. A particular struggle emerged between several influential nations on Earth (the European Federation, Republic of North America, East African Federation, and the North American Ecological Compact, along with their respective allies), and the Mars-Jupiter Corporate Forum (herein "the MJCF"), a series of mining conglomerates that banded together to protect their material and business interests. In addition to the current piracy case, the MJCF were also involved in a number of other controversies, including labor disputes, security actions, and asteroidal realpolitik, both before and after the 2082 incident (See Stickney Rebellion, Callistonian Last Stand, 16 Psyche Affair). Though outside the scope of this analysis, these serve to demonstrate the broadly controversial conduct of the MJCF in the field of Astropolitics.

The crux of the dispute between the nations of Earth and the MJCF was the acquisition of phosphorus. Simply put, phosphorus is critical to the long-term function of a space colony. Several important biological processes in both plant and animal life rely on it. Without it, a colony cannot expand, and must resort to extreme recycling measures to sustain itself. Phosphorus was considered by the first Astropolitical thinkers to be Earth's great bargaining chip, as it was known to be rare throughout the Solar System. While this initially held true, the discovery of phosphorus deposits on Deimos, as well as several Mars-crossing asteroids, meant that the already corporate-controlled Mars colonies no longer had to rely on Earth to sustain themselves (See Timeline of Martian Independence).

Both the Earth and the MJCF were intent on expanding their existing colonial operations, as well as constructing larger orbital habitats. This, along with lingering resentment among the nations of Earth over Martian independence, meant that conflict between them was inevitable (See Martian Civil Conflicts (2089-Present), Earth-Mars Trade War (2068-Present)). Ultimately, these tensions would crystallize in 2082, when the Martian automated transfer vehicle (ATV) "Rockefeller", carrying a cargo composed entirely of phosphorus, was intercepted en route to Jupiter.

## **Involved Parties:**

Aside from the aforementioned astropolitical powers, another group is critical to the understanding of this incident. The Asteroid Belt Mutual Assistance Cooperative (herein "ABMAC") is a loosely federated group of independent asteroids. They were founded with the intent to create a self-sustaining and mutualist society in the belt, and although unable to rival any of the major powers by means of industrial or military strength, are still an important player in the astropolitical landscape of the late 21st Century. Headquartered on asteroid 12 Victoria, they have a history of involvement in several actions against the MJCF and other similar organizations (See Stickney Rebellion). This stance would make them allies

of circumstance with the nations of Earth, although as is evident, their aims were (and still are) quite divergent beyond opposition to corporate expansion.

Of course, ABMAC-aligned asteroids are only a small percentage of the total number of colonized asteroids. Most prefer to keep their heads down, lest they incur the wrath of their corporate sponsors and be cut off from supply shipments. The primary actors in the 2082 incident fell into the latter category.

Asteroid 2044 LP7, a small S-type asteroid on an unremarkable orbit, was colonized by a group of families as a franchise of Pershing Interplanetary Dynamics, a founding member of the MJCF. Intrepid pioneers, they had banded together and thrown their resources behind an asteroid mining franchise, believing that they would strike it rich in space and send the money to family and friends back home on Earth. However, like so many others, this dream never materialized, and the 2044 LP7 franchise entered into an oversaturated market, deep in debt from the initial startup costs. The most profitable asteroids had already been secured directly by the companies, leaving the middling C- and S-Type asteroids to the franchises. (See 16 Psyche Affair).

Two members of this franchise, Samantha Kleitmann and Eliza Newcomb, would become the perpetrators of the first recorded instance of interplanetary piracy in the history of Human space exploration.

#### **Inciting Incident:**

Communications records from 2044 LP7 are not forthcoming, but testimony from Kleitmann and Newcomb references an anonymous message received by the habitat's standard communications array, along with the typical news broadcasts, network server responses, and corporate communications. In fact, Kleitmann stated that she almost deleted the original message out of habit, before the lack of a sending address caught her attention.

The actual contents of the message are only referenced in testimony, and were said to pertain to the departing Martian ATV, including detailed orbital flight plans, engineering data, and the all-important cargo manifest. ATV "Rockefeller" was carrying 20 standard containers of refined phosphates en-route to colonies on and around Callisto. The sender has yet to be identified, but it is the position of this journal that it was likely sent either by ABMAC or Earth-aligned parties, as both appear to have been aware of the operation, though the specifics cannot be discerned at this time. In addition, the message contained promises of amnesty and political protection from potential MJCF retaliation, which did eventually materialize. Finally, the message promised further elaboration at a nebulous "later time." The question of what this elaboration entailed has so far been left unanswered by all involved parties, a move that has only sparked further speculation on the part of the public.

Understandably, the 2044 LP7 crew was skeptical. After all, could this sender be verified? Nonetheless, several network queries and orbital calculations proved that most of the message was accurate, although the cargo of the ATV was kept secret at the time. It is believed that 2044 LP7 was selected because its orbit offered an optimal intercept trajectory with the ATV's projected flight path.

#### **Involved Spacecraft:**

ATV "Rockefeller" was a standardized autonomous design utilizing two afterburning fission-fragment engines (AFFRE), so selected to make the best use of Mars' limited fissile materials. Ships like this regularly flew routes between Mars and Jupiter, their efficient engines allowing a large margin of departure from conventional transfer windows. Nonetheless, "Rockefeller" would be travelling a relatively standard route on this flight: A spiral-out burn from Mars orbit, followed by a partial continual thrust trajectory to Jupiter, followed by a braking burn at Callisto.

The ship constructed by the 2044 LP7 crew, on the other hand, was not of a standardized design. Based on both testimony and practical analysis on-orbit, it was built from a typical inflatable habitat and an airlock placed on top of a large water tank, which itself was connected to the solar thermal propulsion segment of an automated asteroid mining craft, of the kind typically used to vaporize small boulders in search of water. According to Newcomb and Kleitmann, the main tank was used as an emergency water repository by the colony, should the automated prospectors fail to find any in the nearby area. Still, the families agreed to put both the tank and the water it contained towards the cause, falling back on smaller containers and the water used for shielding the rest of the habitats. Also of note is the fact that, despite the ship being used over the course of several months, it had not been given a proper name by either Kleitmann or Newcomb. The two claim that this was largely due to the fact that they could not agree to a name, and chose to shelve the debate, lest it drive a wedge between them while they were still months out from completing the mission. Though the specific capabilities of the pirate vessel can only be inferred, this mission appears by all accounts to have been only barely within its capabilities, owing to its relatively inefficient propulsion system and fuel choice.

### **The Proceedings:**

After performing a small ejection burn from 2044 LP7, the pirate vessel coasted in interplanetary space for several months before nearing the trajectory of the ATV. Matching speeds with the ATV was a costly maneuver, given that the “Rockefeller” was moving much faster than the pirate vessel on its journey to Jupiter. Fortunately for the pirates, however, the ATV’s engines had already shut down by this point to conserve enough fuel for the braking maneuver at Callisto, and even if they were to be activated, the ATV was incapable of performing autonomous evasive maneuvers, given that the threat of piracy was, up to this point, unheard of.

Upon matching speeds with the “Rockefeller”, the pirate vessel closed the distance to dock using a series of primitive mass drivers for finer control. Little more than compressed gas canisters firing bits of asteroid dust, they nonetheless allowed a degree of precise control beyond what the main engine could afford. Like many approach/docking procedures with nuclear powered spacecraft, it was forced to approach from the front, so as to stay out of the “radiation shadow” produced by the ATV’s engines and reactor. For the uninitiated, these components produce an extreme amount of neutron radiation, which is not only hazardous to humans, but also has adverse effects on the structural integrity of most materials after prolonged exposure. To solve this, nuclear-powered spacecraft have a thick tapered cylinder of dense material placed between the radioactive parts and the rest of the spacecraft to shield it. This shield produces an approximate cone of safe space, and anything placed outside of it will not only be bombarded by neutron radiation, but also risk scattering neutrons inside the “radiation shadow”, negating the effect of the shield. Adhering to standard safety procedures, the pirate vessel had to back towards the front of the ATV, keeping its large focusing mirrors (used to power the solar thermal engine) out of the shadow.

Ordinarily, cargo transfer between spacecraft is facilitated by one or more manipulator arms, used to safely move containers from one ship to another. However, in this case, such systems were unavailable to the pirates, and not present on the ATV either. To transfer the cargo across, Kleitmann and Newcomb had to don spacesuits and maneuvering units in order to EVA (extravehicular activity) across to the “Rockefeller”, spools of tether in hand. A quote from the testimony succinctly summarizes the mood:

NEWCOMB: “I mean, it was around this point where I was thinking ‘are we really doing this?’ Being cooped up for months in the same habitat we had already been in, sure. But that EVA is where the gravity of the situation really hit. One wrong move and you’d go flying off into a hail of radiation and die horribly. Another and a tow line comes loose and clips your helmet. So we were both on edge, to put it lightly.”

Despite a close call where Kleitmann's maneuvering unit failed and threatened to propel her outside the radiation shadow, the two were able to secure two standard containers of phosphates, and jettisoned the rest. This decision was met with severe scrutiny by authorities on Earth, as no messages received by the 2044 LP7 crew instructed them to do this. Kleitmann defended the decision, stating:

KLEITMANN: "Was it rash? Sure. No arguments to the contrary here. But I will say this. It would have been impossible for us to secure all 20 containers; we wouldn't have had the delta-V [measure of a spacecraft's potential change in velocity] to make it to 12 Victoria. I figured that, if we couldn't secure it, better to scatter it to space than have it be used by the [MJCF] to expand their dominance over the Solar System."

After securing two containers, the pirate spacecraft backed away from the ATV and performed another costly burn to slow down enough to arrive at its projected destination of 12 Victoria. However, this trajectory would be precluded by the anonymous notification that a trio of Martian "Hippodamia" Class patrol ships had been launched from low Mars orbit to intercept the small unnamed spacecraft. Each patrol craft was only lightly armed (only bearing a single conventional machine gun), but would still pose a significant threat to the unarmed and unarmored pirate vessel. In order to accomplish this trajectory, the Martian patrol craft (which used conventional methane-oxygen chemical engines) had attached drop-tanks in order to have enough fuel to conduct limited interplanetary trips like this. The Martian ejection burn would use up all of the fuel in the drop-tanks, meaning that the interceptors were severely limited in terms of what maneuvers on the part of the pirate spacecraft they could account for. Evidently, the ABMAC was aware of this, and sent a direct message to the pirate vessel urging them to change course.

The pirate vessel expended all of its remaining fuel to adjust its trajectory towards the inner Solar System, specifically to secure an Earth flyby in the hopes that another vessel could be sent to slow them down before they went flying off into interplanetary space again. This significant course-correction meant that the Martian interceptors were forced to abort their pursuit. Burning after the pirate vessel would leave them without fuel, having only partially completed the intercept maneuver. Recovery by MJCF-aligned parties would not be assured. Ultimately, they gave up and burned for Mars.

Several months later, the pirate vessel, with its cargo of phosphates, was safely braked into an elliptical Earth orbit by an East African Federation nuclear tug. Kleitmann and Newcomb were quickly disembarked and sent to Earth, while its cargo was unloaded and sent to a logistics station in low Earth orbit while the powers that be decided what to do with the phosphates. Less than a year later, the rest of the 2044 LP7 crew were brought to Earth and given the promised political protection from the MJCF's retribution. This perceived slight by the nations of Earth was one of the major catalysts of the current Earth-Mars conflict, which has evolved from a strictly trade-based competition to the series of skirmishes and covert actions that we see in the present day. What this means for the future of Humanity as we rapidly approach the 22nd Century cannot be said for certain, but the impact of the 2082 "Rockefeller" Piracy Incident on the state of modern Astropolitics should not be understated.

**For a complete history  
of Balticon, please visit:**

**[www.bsfs.org/  
bconhist.htm](http://www.bsfs.org/bconhist.htm)**

**Oral History of BSFS  
Video Online**

David M. Ettlin, one of the two surviving founding members of BSFS, tells the story on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/4Bxb4WBvh6E?si=Hllpfg-J9W4HeUEQ>

# One Small Step

DeRique Smith

Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2026 Young Writers' Contest  
Frederick, MD

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My hands tremble with anticipation and fear. I am small, I've always known that. Lilliputians like me grow no larger than six inches. A foot, in the case of Wardens, our protectors. I'm scared. Scared I'll spend the rest of my life trapped within these walls.

This prison both keeps us safe and entraps us. We'll never see 'Outside' unless we take that first, small step. We are not human; even so, we still deserve to see the world as they do.

I inhale, finding my courage and spying through the cabinet's gap.

"Lilith...I'm not sure if this is a good idea..."

"*Shhh!* I know what I'm doing!"

I thrust my finger over Trevor's thin lips, shushing him before the Warden could pick up on the sound. We look on as the *ten-inch-tall* Lilliputian dwarfs everything in her office. It's a cramped room, papers strewn about.

Warden Beatrice is a bastion of physique and honor. Coupled with the onyx-colored armor she dons, which dresses her head-to-toe, was a sewing needle was bound to her hip with black fabric. Its keen edge could cleave through steel with but a prick, and it had! I've seen it!

The Warden was, simply put, *awesome*. Her quiet snarls reverberate throughout the room with a sort of beastly elegance as we wait suspended within her cupboard, making it difficult to tell whether she's actually aware of us or just in her usual state of mild annoyance.

Trevor scowls at my fingertip.

"Stop dragging me into this!"

I roll my eyes.

"Just trust me, Trev. Once we're done, we're not just gonna see the Outside, but we're gonna prove to everyone in this city just how brave we are! They'll promote us to Wardens!"

Unlike myself, *he* didn't fail to notice the glimmer in my eyes. Ambition, like so few of us in Baile an Bhalla—our city—had. All content to live our lives within the walls of the Human's quarters. Like termites, without a purpose beyond survival. Without the desire to be something *more*.

I was damned tired of it. Trevor sighs and nods as we turn back to the Warden, who finally storms off with a huff.

"Now?" Trev shoots me a glance.

"Just a second...*now!*"

We leap from the cupboard in a sudden burst of movement, our tunics nearly catch in the hinges, but we just barely manage to twist through. By the time the Warden—ten steps away from the threshold of the office—hears us, Trevor's already shut the door and lodged a chair beneath the handle.

My small heart beats rhythmically in my chest whilst her resin-armored fists strike at the door, adrenaline rushes through my veins like water through the very pipes that support our town. Papers and trinkets fly as Trevor and I search desperately for our boon.

*Think, think, where would a Compass be?*

Without that, navigation through the Outside was impossible. A Warden's compass was attuned to the unfamiliar magnetic field, lacking that was no different from lunging into a pit of mosquitoes—blasted things.

"That's not lasting long, Lilith!" Trevor calls out from behind. The door begins to *splinter* with each of Warden Beatrice's blows.

Finally, my hands cradle the object of my desire. A round, polished silver badge.

No matter how I maneuver it, light always moves in one direction, like a beacon, which not even the Outside's night could conquer. *The Compass*, it was adjusting itself constantly!

"I got it! Let's go!" The Compass' light shines over Trevor when I raise it overhead, rewarding me with a wide smile from my friend.

Almost as if hearing the thrill in my voice, the door is *flung* inward with a final kick from Warden Beatrice. It turns to shrapnel subsequently upon hitting the far wall. Trevor and I feel our bodies go stiff as her heavy steps sound through the room.

Within that helm, one can't identify her face. Just a flash of her eye color can be seen up close, deep violet. Everything else is veiled in the shadow her armor casts. When she speaks, it's with the diction of a soldier. Old, but with an undeniable authority behind it.

"What are you two *doing*? Rats and ants, this place is a pigsty!"

She looks at her office in dismay as if the majority of this clutter wasn't already here.

"Uh—we were just...*surprise attack!*"

Out of nowhere, Trevor pulls out a small hemp bag. He pivots off his back foot, twisting in one smooth motion to face the Warden before *launching* the bag directly into the visor of her helm.

Neither I, nor the Warden expect that. Let alone the cloud of powder that flurries outward at the moment of impact. Was that *itching powder*? I blink a few times before grabbing Trev by the collar of his tunic and making a break for it. Past the flailing Warden and straight through the door.

Trevor looks at his palms as if they were drenched with blood.

"I can't believe I did that."

"Just keep running, idiot!"

"I'm so dead."

We dart through crowds of confused Lilliputians, past the streets of Baile an Bhalla with a will neither of us knew we had. It's not long before the first alarm sounds, a wailing which warrants panic in all but the patrolling soldiers, who instantly begin looking for the closest disturbance—us.

We turn past them and into an alleyway, dashing toward the Border. The very edge of our city, where a single poster lies. But we keep running, for we both know what's behind that piece of parchment. I put it there, after all.

I reach for the bag draped over my side, and remove: the Compass, a spool of thread, and my personal threading needle.

The needle isn't nearly as large as Beatrice's, but it'd do. I thread the needle and toss it through the parchment as we run, using the Compass as a guide. The poster crumples inward with a burst of air nearly throwing us back as the concealed rat hole is exposed.

The needle lodges into something on the Outside, but neither I nor Trevor bother confirming what. The soldiers are hot on our trail. *Run, run damn you!* I'm sure Trev's telling himself the same thing as we *finally* reach the hole.

It'd be safer to tie the thread down, keep it secure so that we could zipline out. *There's no time.*

"Uh...Lilith, what're you—WOAH!"

I haul him over my shoulder and turn to face the soldiers with a wide grin.

"Lads, lassies. A pleasure." I give a bow...right before I leap through the hole and find myself *swinging* through an entirely new world on a line of thread.

Trevor's mixed shouts of fear and thrill combine with the awestruck exclamations from Baile an Bhalla's Lilliputians. Neither reach my ears, or rather I don't bother with listening. *Look, look and see what only the bravest dare venture!*

Light streams through an absurdly large pane of glass, more brilliant than anything I've ever seen within the walls. Plants decorate what I assume to be a windowsill, larger than life and crawling upon the wooden casing.

I don't even realize I'm laughing until the wind blowing through my hair begins to die down—*A land of giants!* Nothing beyond recognition, but so...so *huge* it encompassed a sort of wonder I'd only felt while reading.

"...*ilith!*"

Cabinets that even the tallest building back home couldn't compare to, a bed you could fit thirty cities in! Goodness, even the *ground* was so expansive that it was a world unto itself. So new...so glorious!

"Lilith!"

My head snaps toward Trevor, who's softly punching my shoulder.

"What?"

"The thread! It's loose!"

In sudden terror, I look where my threading needle landed. Directly on top of what I assumed to be a dresser, where a certain creature was resting.

Was that...a paw? It slaps the needle out of its position as Trevor and I exchange a glance.

"Oh."

Then, we fall.

When I wake, I see Trevor respooling the loose thread. Carpeted floors and our small bodies made the fall barely noticeable.

My threading needle lies beside me, thus I pick it up and use it to support my weight. Injured or not, that *hurt*.

"Ow. Bad fall, but it'll heal. Where do you wanna go next, Trev?"

He pauses and turns to me with wide eyes. Genuine exasperation leads him to stutter before he manages to get what he wants to say out.

"Go...? Lils, if this floor wasn't made of carpet we'd be crippled or *dead!* There's a limit to how far I'm willing to go."

I scowl, "So that's it? You're just gonna back out like a coward?"

"A *coward!* Lilith do you even know—no."

He finishes with the thread and tosses the spool at me, his face is grim, but not hateful. In fact, his eyes almost seem desperate.

"Fine, Lilith. I don't want the next time I see you to be a corpse, so I'll come. What did you want to—"

“Mreeeeowwww.”

We pause.

“Was that you?”

“No.”

The *creak* from behind us is our first warning, a slow, thumping gait is the next. Orange fur greets us as we turn, not the dull colors of our homeland, but *brilliant*. A gradient sun-touched yellow which slowly turns into a wondrous saffron.

Each movement the beast made was calculated, its body always lowered as if prepped to lunge. Two golden eyes lock onto us as its maw seeps hungrily with fetid saliva, and we both tremble with a fear even the Wardens couldn't instill.

I'd only heard of its ilk in storybooks. Here stood a fantasy, not unlike dragons or vampires; realer than anything else I had ever witnessed.

*A cat.*

“Lilith—run.”

The feline *lunges* with such speed that it would've bit Trevor's head off had he been a second slower. We pump our legs, even more than we had whilst escaping the guards, but it was so *fast!* Like a wagon pulled by tamed mice, if not quicker!

What runs through me isn't the excitement we felt when we first set out, but dread. Cold sweat drips through my tunic, its icy touch only countered by the heat of the blood coursing through my veins.

Trevor catches a loose thread from the spool and pulls me to the side, narrowly avoiding another lunge as the wretched beast crashes into a night stand. It yowls before once more fixing us with that aureate gaze.

“Where's...the darn...hole?” Trevor forces the words out, already nearing the limit of his stamina.

“The fall screwed up our position! I can use the Compass but—” I leap over a swiping claw, “—I don't have the strength to pull us back up!”

“*Darn it!*” I would've laughed at the gross understatement, but death was on our backs.

Fed up, I ready my needle and turn to face the pursuer, my breath steadies. Enough running, a Warden would have taken it out. The cat's mouth seemed to upturn slightly in mirth—do cats smile?

“Lilith what are you *doing?*”

“I'll hold it off, you...you go.”

I return the beast's expression with far less enthusiasm. My body moves without thinking, a thrusting lunge with the needle as I aim for its eye. I could do it! I would—

A claw comes at me from the side. Death approaches, a guillotine's blade upon which my neck is settled beneath. My eyes close as I have a sudden realization.

*This was a mistake.*

...But death never comes. A gentler force pushes me aside before the claw can touch me, and instead of my own, *Trevor's* scream echoes as the claw tears through his arm.

He slides across the ground, sobbing.

“Lils...go!”

I look at my friend. My loyal, kind friend who had ventured here because of *me*. Who was hurt because of me. Then, I wail at the bastard who cut him. My needle raises as I force myself onto my feet, *I'll bury this thing.*

Moments before I run toward my end, something crashes down from the sky. An arrow of obsidian *bonks* the feline on the nose so hard it actually whines. Not hurt, but so frightened it darts away.

“Ugh, cats. Put that needle down, if you cut it the Human’ll notice and we’ll all be in danger.”

Warden Beatrice. Her violet gaze steady beneath the shadow of her visor. A sewing needle sharper than steel within her grasp. Even as the Sun outside begins to set, it seems willing to give just an ounce of its light to glorify her presence. Glimmering armor in an encroaching twilight.

“Are you crying?” Beatrice asks, aghast.

I wipe my eyes weakly, “Oh, yeah. I guess I am.”

She shakes her head, muttering something about ‘troublesome brats’ as she wraps her hilt’s fabric around Trevor’s wound. His pained moans do little as she tightens it.

“Grab on.” Hefting him over her shoulder, she turns to me, offering an arm. I grab it and watch as she holds onto both of us with but one, using the other to lift her needle, to which thread is tied.

Her resin armor *stretches* as her muscles flex themselves against the onyx covering. She reels her arm back, strength bubbling within each sinew of her body. Then, she launches it with such force even the air is sundered.

The needle lodges itself directly beneath the hole. She draws Trevor and me close, jumps, and *pulls* us with enough strength to send us hurtling through the gap in the wall.

My landing is rough, causing me to roll along the ground as we re-enter the Lilliputian city of Baile an Bhallda. Beatrice places Trevor down gently as soldiers come to take him in for medical care.

Her gaze shifts between the two of us. A wounded boy and a girl hardly able to keep upright. A mess of a duo, if I had to say.

“This was completely and utterly stupid. You two could’ve died.”

My head lowers dejectedly. Beatrice sighs.

“...But, we have kept the youth of this place isolated from the Outside for far too long. Raised on naught but stories. You won’t be Wardens, we are guardians, and frankly I wouldn’t trust you two to guard dirt from a blind man. However, we can have more than Wardens or soldiers to protect this city. Perhaps...perhaps what we need are *Explorers* to expand it.”

She rubs her chin. My head rises, eyes wide. Somehow, I manage to stutter as Trevor groans a shock of his own, a group of soldiers raise him onto a stretcher.

“Y-You mean we...”

“If you wish. So? What do you say?”

A lot of tears—happy, sorrowful, and pained—came after that. Trevor wouldn’t follow me, and I wouldn’t force him to, not again. Yet, when I looked forward, I saw a glimpse of a future awaiting me.

All because of that willingness to try; that one, small step. 