The Family Jewels

by AllenbysEyes

Summary

Historical/Human AU. It's 1975, and the entire country is obsessed with spies, cover-ups and assassination plots. Except Lapis Lazuli, who'd much rather not relive her shameful past or confront her dark secrets. When a mysterious hit squad targets her for assassination, however, she's forced to ally with a nosy congressional aide and a shadowy group of women determined to expose the truth and seek justice on their own terms.

Notes

Welcome to my first Steven Universe fic! I'm trying an alternate universe story similar to Gravity Falls fics I've already written, being an historical thriller rather than a fantasy show;
hopefully, you'll find the story interesting and my treatment of the characters acceptable even if it's an unusual setting. Not committing to any ships this early in the game, we'll see how the story unfolds. Thanks for reading, and please feel free to favorite, follow and review (constructive criticism welcome)!
Peridot

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

September 15th, 1975

WASHINGTON, DC

Peridot couldn't remember where she'd seen the witness before. She looked extremely familiar - one doesn't forget someone like that, at least six feet tall, rail thin like a dancer, her strawberry-blond hair coiffed to a curious point in the back, a strange air of aristocratic grace mixed with unconscionable nervousness - but she couldn't place her.

All she knew, as she walked into the hearing room, was her name: PEARL WHITE.

Peridot ("Perry" to her friends, because who would go around with the name Peridot?) sat on one side of the table with a tape recorder set up beside her. Next to her, a tall nebbishy staffer, Dylan Cartwright, fiddled with the microphone until it screamed playback into their faces.

"Jesus Christ, Dylan," she said, punching him in the arm. "You don't wanna scare away all our witnesses."

"I'm sorry," Dylan muttered as he turned the volume down to a manageable level. "That's a bit unfair, though. If they aren't scared of a Congressional subpoena or press coverage or notoriety..."

"If the Republic falls and anarchy reigns, it will be all your fault," Peridot growled, ignoring him.

She was teasing, but not really. She didn't really like Dylan, a humorless, stuck-up young Republican who thought himself a genius for being a young Republican (even though he was clearly deficient in basic technical, motor and social skills). If she had to work with a minority party staffer, she wished that Senator Baker's aide Mike was with her instead. At least he was cute (as guys went, anyway) and competent and had a sense of humor and some neat Watergate stories.

"Sorry for the mayhem," Peridot said, raising out of her seat and extending a hand to her witness. She looked down and noticed a huge wrinkle in her green pantsuit, and sheepishly patted it down with her free hand. Pearl, dressed in a flawless dark blue outfit, smiled indulgently.

"My name is Peridot Khoury," the assistant continued, shaking Pearl's hand. "I work for Senator Dewey from Delmarva. I believe we spoke on the phone."

"Yes, I remember," Pearl said. "It's a pleasure to meet you." She looked wryly at Dylan, still trying to position the microphone just so. "And don't worry, I see a lot more intimidating people than you and your friend on a daily basis."

Peridot laughed, a deep nasal chortle that briefly startled Pearl. "Don't mind him," she said in a stage whisper, "he's a Republican." Dylan muttered something inaudible in response. And Pearl's sardonic expression indicated to Peridot that she wasn't overly fond of Democrats, either.

"Anyway, my "friend" here is Dylan Cartwright, who's an aide to Senator Schweiker," she continued officiously. Dylan looked up from the tape recorder long enough to extend a hand absently to Pearl, nod, then turn back to his hapless technical fidgeting.
"Like we discussed on the phone, this is just a pro forma interview," Peridot said, nervously straightening her blonde hair and her jewelry. "We're vetting potential witnesses for the Committee and your name came up on a few lists we received from the Vice President's office."

"Yes, you mentioned that," Pearl said, her voice studiously polite. "Of course, I have no idea why and how my name came up..."

"You used to work for the FBI, didn't you?" Peridot asked.

"Used to being the operative word," Pearl emphasized. "And it isn't like I had access to any state secrets or things that are worth questioning me about. Still, I was in town and didn't have anything better to do today..."

"Then this should go easily," Peridot said, a little testily, as she invited her witness to sit down.

She felt just a bit annoyed, though not really surprised, that they'd handed her minor, inconsequential witnesses like this. After all, Senator Dewey was the junior senator on the Church Committee, having just been elected the previous fall, and hadn't done much to distinguish himself yet. He only received a spot because a more senior Senator had a heart attack and had to be replaced at the last moment. Such are the verities of Washington.

She rued that Mike and Natalie Cohen, her two best friends among the investigative staff, had been preparing William Colby, the former CIA director, for his public testimony scheduled the following day. That was sure to get all sorts of attention, not least because Senator Church had arranged for television coverage of the event. And high level Company officials testifying about assassination and espionage was sure to bring all kinds of attention and accolades.

No one was going to care about Pearl White, or even know her name, outside of this room. She might not even make it past the vetting unless she had something interesting to say. Which Peridot doubted. A mid-level FBI staffer, who probably did nothing more than type letters and file envelopes? It was a waste of time.

Still, she had to admire the committee's thoroughness and commitment to turning over every possible rock for leads and information. It showed that they were seriously committed to finding the truth. She just wished that she'd received a more interesting rock to examine than this.

Yet she now felt that there might be something interesting about Pearl. Her appearance was striking, but that wasn't it. The aloof, knowing if slightly irritated way she carried herself intrigued Peridot, making her think that she might well be keeping some secrets. But it was up to her to find out.

"As you know, this isn't a deposition or official testimony," Peridot said. "That's why we didn't ask you to bring along an attorney or..."

She interrupted her statement to watch Dylan angrily punch the tape recorder. Peridot exchanged glances with Pearl, whose polite, poised smile couldn't hide her growing irritation. Peridot blushed; at this point, she couldn't blame Pearl.

Peridot audibly sighed and pulled the tape recorder away from Dylan. Then she pushed the RECORD button, before turning back to Pearl and continuing her introduction.

Around the same time, Oliverio Vasquez left the Capitol annex, harried and a bit irritated. He'd been interviewed that day for the second time by a few committee staffers. They still weren't sure they wanted to have him publicly testify. And Vasquez, by now, was rather irritated.
Vasquez felt his story was a good one. He'd been an aide to Salvadore Allende, the former President of Chile whose left wing politics landed him in trouble with the United States. Despite Vasquez's best efforts to negotiate with the striking workers in that country, the unions liked American dollars more than Chilean promises, and their holdout caused the economy to stagnate. When Augusto Pinochet seized power on September 11th, 1973, it came as no surprise to Vasquez, who knew something drastic would unfold.

Because Vasquez, despite his connection to the late President, moved in the same circles as Pinochet's clan and heard whispers long before it happened. While visiting Valparaiso that July, he'd chatted at length with an indiscreet, possibly drunk American intelligence officer who confided that the Chilean military was preparing to make its move. He might not have thought anything of it, until two days later, when someone in the Chilean Defense Ministry told him the same thing. And in explicit detail, as well, that "the Yanquis are preparing to deliver us from socialism. God bless the United States."

Circumstantial evidence, perhaps. But it struck Vasquez as incriminating, showing at the very least that the imminent coup was common knowledge, that everyone knew it was coming, and that most people connected it instantly with the Americans. And what would the Church Committee like more than testimony about that?

Then why hadn't he done anything about it? Vasquez puzzled that one out endlessly. Instead of informing his boss or the proper authorities, he kept mum, perhaps hoping it was just loose talk, perhaps not really expecting it to come off, even if tried. But after awhile he couldn't ignore it, and on September 11th, as the Army seized Santiago and Allende put a rifle in his mouth, Vasquez caught a flight to Mexico City, surrounded himself with bodyguards and handguns, and waited until he had a chance, finally, to make his case and tell his story to American officials.

Maybe that was why he was so keen on testifying about it now. He could talk to the newspapers, but that would bring him mere notoriety, and there'd be no way to verify his claims. Testimony under oath, before Congress, would be something much more convincing. More concrete. Perhaps enough to change Americans' minds, and perhaps even get some justice for his home country. He could hope.

But his meetings with the American investigators - a young man and woman, young enough to be his children, certainly long haired and awkward enough to seem like kids playing dress-up than real adults - hadn't impressed him. He'd told as much of his story as he could, found them somewhat nonplussed, feeling that his tale was too vague and unspecific to be very helpful, yet intrigued enough that it might contain something to ask him back a second time. Only to elicit the same confused, hopeful but noncommittal response.

Maybe he would just talk to the Washington Post or the New York Times after all, he thought as he stepped into his car, trying to. I might have J. Anthony Lukas or Seymour Hersh's numbers at my hotel...

Such were his last thoughts, hope tinged with resentment, as the ignition sparked and the car exploded into a giant fireball, incinerating him in an instant.

"Did you tell them anything?"

Pearl looked across the seat to her friend Garnet, a tall black woman with a West Indian accent. They were driving through the city in a beat-up Plymouth Road Runner.

"I told them that I worked for the FBI and handled materials from the director's office," Pearl
responded. "A nice, legalistic response that's Strictly True, but doesn't really tell them anything. Just like we discussed."

Garnet nodded in approval. "Good."

"I'm still not sure why we shouldn't cooperate with Congress," a raspy voice popped up from the backseat. "I mean, they're basically exposing everything that we've been trying to expose. Wouldn't it make more sense to go public?"

"We've been over this a million times, Amethyst," Garnet said coolly. "They're politicians. We can't trust them. They want attention, they want to grandstand, they don't actually want to do anything. If they wanted to do something about intelligence agencies, they would have done it a long time ago. Now that it gives them something to draw attention to themselves and beat down any real change."

"Hey, I'm not saying I trust politicians or anything," Amethyst responded. "I mean, fuck those guys. But still, seems kinda dumb to keep hiding it when everyone's interested. Plus, how many people would see Pearl or any of us on TV and hear our story?"

"Too many," Garnet growled in a menacing tone.

Pearl nodded gravely. "I don't know if I entirely agree with Garnet," she admitted. "I mean, any exposure or scrutiny might help. But she's right that we can't always rely on elected officials to do the right thing. Besides, we need to be sure that we can make a concrete, lasting difference before making a move in public. And we don't want anyone trying to knock us off beforehand."

"Pff, Like I'm afraid of any government creeps," Amethyst said, cracking her knuckles.

"They have guns, Amethyst," Pearl reminded her.

"So do we," Amethyst insisted.

"Guns or no guns, we've been acting outside the law for the past four years," Garnet added. "We can't just show up at the Capitol Building and say, hey, we've been stealing incriminating documents and things from you guys, and now we want to give them back. Would be kinda foolish, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Amethyst admitted.

"Better safe than sorry," Pearl agreed. Though as they drove through the city, she wondered how far she and her friends could really take that maxim.

At a cafe in Alexandria, a heavily-built woman sat sipping tea and reading a newspaper. She tried to look inconspicuous, wearing a dark overcoat and with her frazzled blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. But from appearance alone, she couldn't help standing out. And certainly the jasper stone pinned on her coat lapel didn't help, either.

She'd heard police sirens and a loud commotion from several blocks over. Too vague to figure out whether it meant anything, though she hoped it was a good sign.

Finally, a tall, thin Hispanic man approached, struggling to keep his cool. She gestured to the chair beside her as she kept her head buried in her newspaper.

"Well?" she asked after a long moment.
"Mr. Vasquez kept his appointment," he said cryptically.

The woman smiled. "Glad to hear it, Jorge," she said. "Could have done something more discreet though, don't you think?"

"General Pinochet wanted to send a message," he responded.

"The General isn't the one calling the shots," she reminded him. "Either way, it's done now. Good work."

Jorge nodded and handed her a list.

"Jasper, that makes three down on our list. Three in two weeks. Not bad for a wet job."

"Do you wanna say that a little louder to make sure the whole city hears us?" Jasper snapped, still not looking up at him. "Get back to your hotel and get packing. There's a ticket to Asuncion which you might wanna take advantage of before someone gets wise."

"What about these other three?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it," Jasper assured him. "I'll take care of 'em myself."


_What a doofus_, she thought, watching her agent, into a waiting cab. _We're trying to be as discreet as possible and he's using goddamn car bombs. It didn't make any sense, and it's like he was begging to be caught._

Sighing, Jasper put down her newspaper and pulled the list over to her. _If you want something done right..._ she thought, reading it over.

There were three names remaining. The first was Ricky Capuano, an associate of the Chicago mob who occasionally did business in the Capital. Jasper smiled, knowing him as a fourth-rate hood with a big mouth and some first rate secrets. Probably not smart enough to hide, which makes him an easy mark.

The second name was Pearl White. Jasper knew that she had worked for the FBI for several years, in a position to handle sensitive materials at the very least. She probably didn't actually know anything incriminating, but better safe than sorry.

Jasper read the last name, and did a double take in response. She read it again to make sure she had it right. But there it was:

**LAPIS LAZULI.**

Chapter End Notes

There are disappointingly few books about the Church Committee compared to, say, Watergate. The best is Loch Johnson's _A Season of Inquiry: The Senate Intelligence Investigation_ (1985), a memoir written by one of Frank Church's staffers.

The assassination of a Chilean diplomat in Washington DC really happened, though a
year after this: Orlando Letelier, Allende's former ambassador to the US, was murdered by a car bomb in Sheridan Circle by agents of Pinochet's secret police, DINA. See John Dinges' The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terror to Three Continents (2005).
September 16th, 1975

In the Senate hearing room the following day, there was no mention of Oliverio Vasquez's fate, no acknowledgment that a key committee witness met a bomb the same day he met with Congressional investigators. Maybe there wasn't time to process it. Or maybe, as the Gems thought watching on television, it would distract from their prearranged script.

Instead there was the mixture of manufactured drama, pompous posturing and procedural tedium always created when a gaggle of Senators convenes in the same room. A row of great gray eminences glowering sternly before the camera, as if imagining their pictures in textbooks and portraits one hundred years hence. As if the story they should be unfolding wasn't interesting enough.

Like Frank Church, the pudgy, pompous chairman from Idaho, a devout liberal who'd made his bones denouncing the Vietnam War and thought that chasing spooks could be the blockbuster sequel. He remembered Watergate (how could he not, with Howard Baker, one of his committee colleagues, sitting right there) and how it made everyone involved into a household name. Since Sam Ervin's presidential chances were slim to none, why not grab the bull by the horns?

"It is the right of the American people to know what their government has done," Church intoned, "the bad as well as the good. And we have every confidence that this country will benefit by a comprehensive disclosure of this grim chapter in our recent history."

"Bor-ing," Amethyst said, throwing a burger wrapper at their television screen. "Could you sound more like a robot?"

"Ameythst, that's just how politicians talk," Pearl insisted. "I think he's saying important things."

"Yeah dude, I know," her friend said. "Say a lot, say it loud, don't say anything important."

"There's no reason to be so cynical," Pearl scolded Amethyst. "That they're even holding public hearings on the CIA of all things is a big step in the right direction."

Amethyst scoffed. "Yeah, it will be a real step when something happens beyond blah blah blah. Nobody really wants to fix anything. That's why we're in business, after all."

"Mr. Church wants to be President," Garnet said. "That's the only reason he's doing this."

Perhaps because she was a bureaucrat at heart, Pearl wanted to assume the best - wanted to think that the system could work, that people in government did have good motives, at least some of them, some of the time. (She certainly had.) Even though her experience should have taught her otherwise.

And as the hearing dragged on, it became harder even for Pearl to keep her faith. Especially when William Colby took the stand.

The breaking point for Pearl came when Church confronted Colby, Director of the CIA, about some damning information that the Committee discovered during its investigation. After the director droned on about bio-weapons and drugs and unorthodox interrogation methods in a long prepared
"Have you brought with you some of the devices which would have enabled the CIA to use this poison for killing people?" Church asked.

"We have indeed," Colby responded.

"Oh my God," Pearl sputtered, leaning forward at this bombshell. She looked over at her partners, hoping they were as intrigued as she. Amethyst's eyes bugged in shock and disbelief, but Garnet, as usual, remained impassive. Not that this shocked Pearl; Garnet was perpetually unimpressed.

They all watched as Colby handed a slender black pistol up, to the general consternation and amusement both of the Committee members and the large crowd. It should have been the moment which cemented for Pearl, and for everyone, the utter seriousness and nastiness of state-sponsored chicanery. That something would come of this.

Instead, confronted with such evidence, she heard Frank Church make a joke.

"Don't point it at me!" Awkward ripples of laughter.

And then he held the strange weapon up for examination, posing with the gun held sideways as cameras flashed and reporters in the gallery gawked and John Tower, the Republican from Texas, stared in disbelief. And suddenly Pearl realized that Garnet had been right all along.

"This man is incredibly unserious," Pearl shouted, twisting her face in disgust. "Here we are talking about the CIA killing people with these James Bond contraptions and he's acting like it's a photo opportunity!"

"That's what I've been saying," Garnet said evenly. "We can't expect anything useful from these clowns. They're out to get publicity and votes, not to find the truth. That's our business."

"Could be worse, I guess," Amethyst shrugged.

"How?" Pearl asked, though she dreaded that she might find out.

As if in answer, Barry Goldwater, the garrulous, saber-rattling Republican from Arizona, grabbed the dart gun from Church and sighted down the barrel, smiling like a kid with a new toy, treating the whole idea of state-sponsored assassinations as a colossal joke. Watching him, Pearl's face flushed with anger and embarrassment.

"Jesus Christ," she sputtered, sinking into her chair and her closing her eyes.

"Good ole Barry knows how to lighten the mood," Amethyst laughed, half-mocking and half-admiring the Senator for his brazen honesty. "Let's be fair, guys, if someone gave us a magic dart gun, we'd be all over it, too! Can you imagine? No more waiting in lines at the movies! No more waiting for a table to open up! No more annoying hecklers at the baseball games! And think how much easier our missions would be! It would be far out."

Pearl was too angry to respond. And Garnet, of course, said nothing.

The interrogation went on, with Colby expounding on the "unfortunate" use of shellfish toxins in different CIA plots over the years without an official directive, issuing bland platitudes and empty, insincere apologies. But it didn't seem to matter. None of it landed, not after the stunt which exposed for Pearl how phony the whole thing seemed. It was all words that meant infinitely less than the Image, the Meaning eclipsed by the Stunt.
She sighed, opening her eyes and staring at the ceiling for a long moment. Even now, it was hard for her to think that her whole life had been a lie in service of - what? National security? Mayhem for mayhem's sake? Men's perennial search for power? It wasn't something she liked, or wanted to think about. But it was there, and she couldn't avoid it any longer.

"Maybe let's do something productive with our time," Garnet suggested, switching off the television with Church's mouth agape in mid-question.

"I could use some action," Amethyst said, springing off the couch. "Now where's my whip?"

Garnet looked at Pearl, who reluctantly sat up and faced her partner. In the background they heard Amethyst playing with a record player until "Ohio" queued up.

"I know this meant a lot to you," Garnet said, walking over and putting a hand on her friend's shoulder. "And I'm sorry that they're letting you down. I'm sure it hurts. But, fuck 'em. If the Government's not gonna take this seriously, we will. Now, let's go kick some ass."

The two exchanged a long, thoughtful glance, as Amethyst searched and danced and hummed "La la lalala la la la" along with Neil Young in the background. Then Pearl's anguished frown finally turned into a smile.

"What did you have in mind?" she asked.

Naturally, as the drama unfolded on television, Peridot found herself on the outside looking in.

"I want to be in the room where it happens," Peridot had pleaded to Senator Dewey. "Just once! Please let Stan take the calls and deal with that bureaucratic nonsense today. That's all I ever do."

"Perry, Stan is your senior," Dewey said, adjusting his tie and wiping sweat off his forehead and collar. "That's why he gets all those assignments. But you're still an important part of Team Dewey."

"This isn't the campaign any more, Senator," Peridot insisted, waving her arms and trying not to shout. "You don't need to pull that Team Dewey crap any more."


"Sorry," Peridot responded. "But come on, I never get to have any fun."

"The business of government isn't fun, young lady," Dewey said. Still talking to Peridot like he was lecturing a particularly slow, stubborn child.

"Easy for you to say," Peridot grumbled, trying to restrain herself from exposing her real feelings about her boss.

"Perry, remember that we weren't supposed to win this election," Dewey pleaded. "I'm not even supposed to be here! I'd rather be back in Beach City picking up trash and planning the Bicentennial and passing restaurant ordinances than, you know, talking to spies about assassinations. None of this is my forte. It's a lot of work, and not much satisfaction..."

So if you're suffering, we have to suffer, too, Peridot thought, scowling. Then why are you here? No one forced you to run - you did it as a favor to a friend in the state Party. Now that you've won, maybe do something instead of whine about how bad you have it.

But she managed to keep her mouth shut, for now. Though she wondered, now, how much longer
that might last.

At that moment, Dewey's other aide, Stan Bayard, stuck his head in the door. "Senator, they're ready for you."

"We'll talk about this some other time, Perry," Dewey said, waving her off. "Time to go on television."

Though he sounded more resigned, like a man headed to an execution, than excited. Not that his discomfort made Peridot feel any better.

Stan caught Peridot's glance and smiled, all aristocratic smugness and male entitlement. And Peridot growled, waiting until he'd left before slamming the door shut.

Mike Shannon, Howard Baker's aide, wasn't much more helpful. Even when Peridot brought up the previous day's bombing, he didn't seem to care.

"Don't think he had anything that would help us, to be honest," Mike admitted, eyes darting around as he watched other aides and senators hurrying to the floor. "It's not like Dick Helms got blown up or anything."

"True, but a former official of the Chilean government is murdered in DC right after speaking with you," Peridot insisted. "Don't you think that's just a tiny bit suspicious?"

Mike clenched his jaw, as if he wanted to say more but felt constrained by something. Peridot waited for the shoe to drop, but it didn't.

"Well, I've gotta run," he said, smiling at Peridot. Then he adjusted his glasses and added: "Always like talking to you, Perry. Maybe we can catch a movie later?"

Smooth. But not smooth enough.

"Not really feeling up to a movie," she grumbled.

"Time of the month, huh?" he sympathized.

And Peridot's mouth dropped hearing him say that. She sputtered a bit, but was too angry to form words. Fortunately, he left before Peridot kneed him in the testicles.

Some day I'm gonna burn this fucking place to the ground, she vowed silently. This chauvinism is intolerable. Nobody here wants to get anything done or do anything serious. And nobody wants to give a woman a chance.

Before she could untangle the personal from the political, Peridot resigned went back to her desk and looked at a note with two phone numbers.

Her first was following up on yesterday's witness, Pearl White. She received a phone number from another staffer for a friend in the FBI's personnel office.

"Special Agent Katz," came the response.

"Hi, this is Peridot Khoury and I work for Senator Dewey," the aide said in her most cheerful voice. "As you know, we're in the middle of our investigation and I've been charged with looking into potential witnesses."
"Well, I'll try to help you as best I can," the Agent said, "but I'm not sure I'm the person you should be speaking with, all things considered. We have a liaison office..."

"I mean, I know Tom Knopsnyder with Senator Mondale's office," Khoury offered. "Said you could help."

She heard a heavy sigh on the other end, with Agent Katz clearly unhappy about having another chit cashed in.

"What do you need?" he said finally.

"One of our subjects - someone we interviewed just yesterday, in fact - was a former FBI employee named...Pearl White." She added that pause, pretending that she hadn't thought about the oddness of the encounter and the witness's curious attitude all night. "She didn't strike us as very forthcoming, and only gave us a bare minimum of background."

"Did you have her under oath?" Katz asked.

"Well, no," Peridot sputtered. "I mean, I'm not an attorney...or a Senator."

"It's Bureau policy not to comment on ongoing investigations," the Agent told Peridot. "Especially when it involves one of our former employees."

"I work for Senator Dewey," Peridot repeated through gritted teeth, struggling to maintain her composure in the face of yet another disappointment. "I'm not, like, some investigative reporter looking for a scoop here. Pearl White is one of our potential witnesses, and we're concerned that she's not being forthright with us."

The phone went silent for a long moment, as if the agent was registering shock. Peridot leaned forward expectantly, eager to see what was happening next.

"No comment on ongoing investigations," came the refrain.

"Gah! All you're doing is making me think you're hiding something!" Peridot shouted into the phone. She was finally near her breaking point. "Keep it up and we'll be sure to have a subpoena delivered to the Hoover Building and shoved where the sun don't shine."

"You can take it up with Director Kelley, honey," Katz responded, relishing the aide's discomfort and frustration. "Maybe get Senator Dewey -" the voice dripped with officious contempt reciting a very junior Democrat's name - "to put in the request for you. All I have to say to you is, no comment." And the phone went dead.

"What a fucking clod!" Peridot yelled, slamming her fist on the desk. She made a mental note to keep looking on her own time...there was much more here to unpack.

For now, she put her head down and took some deep breaths until she was calm enough to make a phone call. Then she sat up and looked down the paper to her next number: Lapis Lazuli.

This was a new name, and she had precious little information on her. She looked at a personnel file compiled by one of Senator Church's researchers, which offered very little:

**LAZULI, LAPIS AZURE. AGED APPROXIMATELY 25 YEARS. BELIEVED TO BE LIVING IN BENSALEM, PA. MAY HAVE SOME KNOWLEDGE ABOUT, OR INVOLVEMENT IN, FBI AND CIA STUDENT INFORMANT PROGRAMS ("COINTELPRO" AND "CHAOS"). REQUEST INTERVIEW TO ASCERTAIN**
KNOWLEDGE, USEFULNESS, WILLINGNESS TO COOPERATE.

This intrigued Peridot, enough that she forgot about Pearl, forgot about the endless sexism and frustrations of being a low-level staffer no one wanted to talk to. She dialed the phone number and waited anxiously with a pencil in hand.

"Hello?"

"Is this Lapis Lazuli?"

"Who is this?" a wan, wary voice came across the other line.

"My name is Peridot Khoury," she said. "I work for Senator Dewey from Delmarva and I'm wondering if I could have a moment of her time."

"Why would a Senator want to talk with me?" Lapis asked.

"We believe you might be a person of interest in our investigation into America's intelligence services..."

"And you're calling me on a telephone?" Lapis's voice broke into anger. "Are you fucking stupid?"

"Sorry ma'am, I...We didn't know how else to contact you."

"Well, I'm not interested in talking with you," came the retort. "Don't call me again. Or mail me, or visit me, or anything."

"Please," Peridot begged. She didn't care how desperate she sounded; she needed something to go right after all the day's slights and petty humiliations.

"It's taken me so long to disappear from the radar," Lapis continued, "and you want to drag me back on? One way or another I'm always going to be screwed over!"

"We just thought you could make a helpful witness," Peridot blurted out helplessly, not sure what to say. Then another pregnant pause.

"I've seen what happens to your witnesses," Lapis hissed into the phone. "I'd rather skip that, if you don't mind."

"But..." The phone went dead before Peridot could finish her sentence. After hanging up the phone, she picked up a trash bin, stuck her head inside, and screamed at the top of her lungs.

After she recovered, she decided to take action on her own accord. If the "proper channels" weren't going to help, she'd have to investigate on her own time. Though she figured now, after Vasquez's death, the FBI's disdain and Lapis's terror, that it would be a lot more dangerous than she could have expected.

What the hell, Peridot thought, I could use some danger. Sure beats pushing paper while getting my ass grabbed.

She thought briefly about what Senator Dewey might do if she skipped work. Then realized she didn't really care.

Screw him, she thought. Screw all of them. I'm tired of sitting in his shadows and listening to Stan and Mike and all the rest lecture and condescend.
Chapter End Notes

For these and other chapters dealing with the Church hearings (aside from those featuring fictional characters), I draw heavily on the transcripts available online through the Mary Ferrell Foundation. Colby's testimony can be found both on YouTube and the C-SPAN website. Unlike the Watergate Senate hearings, though, I'm not aware of a comprehensive storehouse of video.
If Jorge Ramirez had been smart, he would have taken Jasper's advice and headed to Paraguay as instructed. Instead, he stayed in DC another day for unfinished business.

He didn't seem concerned that Oliviero Vasquez's body was still figuratively warm (really, it was in a million scalding hot pieces) and that the District police and FBI were, for the moment, conducting a thorough, intensive investigation. He and his men had done worse - far worse - without even a slap on the wrist. He was above the law in his home country, which was friends with the United States, so he assume he was above the law, that he could get away with just about anything. And maybe he could have, under ordinary circumstances.

If his contacts here - two men, one a tall, mustachioed Cuban emigre, the other a short, balding American of indeterminate age - were any indication, the US government certainly didn't seem concerned, even with Congress asking questions across the street and the public on high alert.

"How much is the General willing to pay for these weapons?" the Cuban gentleman asked in Spanish.

"Anything you ask," Ramirez assured him. "General Pinochet realizes the importance of eradicating Communism in the Western Hemisphere and knows that he has a friend in the United States government."

"That doesn't answer the question of why we're doing this in a back alley, then, instead of a formal trade deal," the Cuban responded.

"Not a good time for your government to be openly selling weapons to a foreign power," Jorge said. "Our friends across town might have something to say about it."

"Not to mention, these weapons aren't going to the Chilean government," the American said. "At least, not officially."

Jorge nodded grimly. The Cuban still seemed uncertain, as if he'd been left out of a secret, but remained dutifully silent.

"Do you have the merchandise?" Jorge asked. The American nodded and he opened up the trunk of his car, a nondescript Lincoln.

Inside the car were two rolled-up bags. Inside the bags were a small arsenal of assault weapons, handguns and grenades. Next to them were two boxes, presumably carrying ammunition.

"You see, my friend, this isn't just an arms shipment," Jorge explained to the Cuban. "My government, this gentleman's government, those of many other countries in Latin America have the same interest. We're getting ready to wage war in the shadows, and we can't let any word of this - even something small like this shipment - get any attention. Not now."
The Cuban frowned. He still felt the United States had an obligation to his country, after what Kennedy and the others did (or didn't do), and the idea of some Johnny-come-lately caudillo in Chile getting help instead didn't sit well with him. He glared at his American partner, who said nothing.

"El cóndor está listo para volar," Jorge declared, rolling up the bag.

"Diamond es lo primero," the Cuban reminded him impatiently.

"¡Pero ahora estás jodido!" a woman shouted back.

The men looked at each other in astonishment. Then they saw a squat, well-built young woman walk into the streetlight, dressed in a black leather jacket with white stars sewn into the knees. She also carried a long whip with a purple gem in the handle.

"Yeah, I speak Spanish," she said casually. "My dad's Puerto Rican and my mom's from Panama. Though I'm a little rusty with the regional nuances, I'm guessing your accent is from Cuba - must be one of those Batista creeps - and you're from, I'm thinking somewhere in South America? Has a strange ring to it."

"This doesn't concern you," the Cuban insisted, speaking English in a gruff accent. "Run along and let the men do their work."

"Oh, but it does!" Amethyst laughed, lashing her whip lightly against the ground. "We're all here now, and you'll have to deal with me before you can finish this little transaction."

The men looked at each other in disbelief, wondering if she was serious.

"You shouldn't mess with things you don't understand," the American warned, more annoyed than angry.

"I think we understand perfectly," another voice said. The men turned and saw Pearl standing in front of the car with her arms folded over her chest, dressed in a pale outfit, her hair practically invisible, looking like an apparition in the dim light.

"You're dreaming up new ways to ruin the world," Pearl said. "Here, in South America, wherever you can send your stuff. And we can't have that. Maybe you think you're above the law or common decency, but you're not above us."

"Give up, honey. We have the law on our side," the American said, smiling with condescension.

"And the law of God!" the Cuban snarled, bristling with anger.

Pearl laughed. "Right! It's God's will that you murder thousands of innocent people, I suppose. Heard that one before, and look where that thinking's got us."

Jorge stood up, examining Pearl with genuine curiosity - and, she resentfully concluded, not a little leering at her.

"How interesting to encounter two lovely women in the middle of an important transaction," he said. "Especially when it doesn't concern you in the slightest."

"You don't get it, do you?" Pearl growled. "This is exactly the sort of thing that concerns us. It's 1975 and we're tired of letting pigs and shiteheels like you turn the world into a shooting range."

"I'm a little curious how you're gonna stop us, honey," the American added, still not taking her
seriously. "Hate to break it to you, but we're not the type."

"That's what I thought," Pearl said, then reached into her outfit with a flourish.

She brandished her preferred weapon - a specially-made saber with the motto "Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity" inlaid on the blade, centering around an image of a rose. She rested it against her shoulder like a Marine standing at attention, waiting for them to make a move.

The American and the Cuban smiled at each other, then drew automatic pistols and aimed them at Pearl. She stared them down with a confident smirk. It took a lot more than that to intimidate her. Especially since she knew what came next.

"DOWN!" Someone yelled, then a deafening blast exploded a few feet away. Pearl covered her head and looked up to see the car's window glass shattering, the crooks taking cover. She looked over to see Garnet shadowed at the other end of the alley, wearing a trench coat and aiming a sawed-off shotgun at their targets.

"You guys are fucked!" Amethyst yelped again, practically trembling with excitement. The whip quivered in her arms, ready for action.

"You can leave your merchandise here," Garnet said flatly, stepping into the light which shimmered in her tall, dark hair. "Or you can die. Your choice."

Pearl shivered at that word. They generally avoided killing anyone - even Garnet, who preferred intimidation over violence in these situations - if only because it was better to leave people like this scared rather than dead. But saying "You can leave, or you can possibly be frightened" didn't have the same kick.

The three men, however, seemed determined to fight. Overcoming their initial surprise and panic, they leaped to their feet at once, preparing to shoot.

"Well, we gave you a chance," Pearl warned one last time. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, preparing herself for battle.

Then she shouted and leaped onto the hood of their car, her saber glittering in the streetlight.

She moved with incredible finesse and swiftness, spinning and leaping as she dispatched the mustachioed Cuban with two fast cuts across his shoulders and right arm. He cried out as blood poured from the injuries, falling to the ground in shock, dropping his weapon. The short American aimed his weapon at her, then fell over as Amethyst lashed her whip around his legs, pulling him into the street.

Jorge Ramirez panicked. He reached for a pistol under his coat, then turned and saw Garnet still leveling her shotgun at him, a disapproving look on her face.

"I wouldn't," she said. He instinctively complied, while cursing himself for his cowardice.

The Cuban, at least, didn't seem interested in fighting any more after Pearl's manhandling. But Short Man still had some fight in him. He managed to wriggle free from Amethyst's whip, reaching into his coat and fitting a pair of brass knuckles on his hand. He started moving towards Amethyst, until Pearl struck him on the back of the head with the flat of her sword. He turned towards Pearl and launched a poorly aimed fist at her, missing by a mile. In response, Pearl kicked him in the side, hard, and he sputtered to the ground, knocked out of breath.

A few feet away, the Cuban finally started to sit up, groaning in pain, his eyes flashing murder. Until
Pearl spun around and leveled the point of her saber at his throat, causing him to fall backwards, cowering and muttering in Spanish.

She and Amethyst exchanged glances, then each looked at the Short Man, staggering to his feet again. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a switchblade.

"I got this," Amethyst assured Pearl. Pearl nodded, then turned her attention back to the Cuban.

Amethyst stood forward, lashing her whip menacingly against the ground as the American started towards her again, trying to regain his balance.

"Come on tough guy, what are you scared about?" Amethyst taunted, gesturing with her free hand for her to come to him. "Just a couple of ladies, after all! You aren't gonna let us hand you your all-American ass on a platter, are ya?"

At this, the Short American screamed and lunged forward with his knife, slashing blindly at Amethyst. Who easily dodged his sloppy, unaimed blows and knocked him over with her elbow. Before he could move, Amethyst planted a heavy foot on the middle of his back, making him cry out in pain and embarrassment.

"That was easy," she said, relishing the thug squirming beneath her. "Man, I woulda thought three tough guys like this would have had more fight in them."

Pearl nodded again, then turned back to the man she had at sword-point, who kept looking around for his weapon, for a way to escape, for a suicide pill, for something to relieve him of his embarrassment.

Nothing came.

"Very good," Jorge said, still facing down Garnet and her shotgun. "I'll admit that I'm impressed. Now, will you please explain what you want from us?"

"This isn't enough?" Amethyst said. "I mean, I'll be able to break your friend's spine here..."

"Amethyst, please," Pearl commanded. "No need for any further violence." She absently wiped the blood off her blade and sheathed it, then started walking over to her friends. When the Cuban tried to lift himself up again, she forced him down with a withering glare.

"I suppose you think we don't understand spy talk," Pearl said. "We know who you are, Major. And we have some idea of why you're here."

"Friends of the Company," Amethyst said with disgust. "Trading arms for money or, I don't know, your kid's souls or whatever the fuck you trade in these days. Bad enough that you've fucked up Paraguay, now you're gonna ruin Chile, too."

"Saving a country from socialism isn't ruining it," Jorge protested.

"Oh please," Pearl said. "Spare us your talking points. I spent years spouting them myself, believing them even. I know all the angles. Domino theory, Red tide, blah blah blah. You're not talking to children here, Major."

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," Jorge said, the condescension returning to his voice.

"Maybe not," Pearl said. "Because we're not horrible, fascist creeps."
By now, Garnet had moved over to the car's trunk and opened it, her eyes widening at the weapons cache inside.

"Pearl, come take a look at this," she instructed. Jorge started to slip a gun into his jacket, then Pearl flinched towards the hilt of her saber, forcing him to back down. Amethyst stepped off the Short American, who groaned in pain, and kept watch.

"Holy Moly," Pearl said. "There's enough here to equip an army."

"We can take care of it," Garnet said. She handed Pearl her shotgun; the tall, pale woman trembled under its weight. She hated guns, which is why she carried a sword even though it wasn't the most efficient weapon. But they didn't know that.

"My mission here in Washington is almost complete," Jorge said. "But, well done ladies, you've intercepted one shipment of small arms. Bravo. That will surely impede the efforts of seven governments."

" Couldn't hurt," Amethyst said, unimpressed.

"Fortunately," Jorge went on, "this is only a side project of mine, for now. Project DIAMOND, or at least my role in it, is nearly complete. And..."

And he took another long look at Pearl, examining her face as she struggled with the gun, and smiled.

"What," Pearl said, bracing the weapon against her hip. "Something here strike you as funny?"

"Pearl White?" Jorge said. "Well, this is a very pleasant surprise."

"I'm sure the feeling isn't mutual," Pearl icily assured him.

"Well, DIAMOND isn't complete without you," he said cryptically.

Pearl's face betrayed shock and fear, despite herself. She still wasn't comfortable with people speaking in whispers and cryptic threats. But this one was more personal, and unnerved her more than it would otherwise.

"What do you mean?" she finally stirred herself to ask, walking slowly towards Jorge, her back to the .

"Oh come now, Ms. White," Jorge said, hands lowering to his sides. "You had to know that you were under investigation. What you did in Media four years ago isn't a secret. And I can certainly guess some other crimes that you've committed since then."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Pearl said. A lawyerly denial rather than a flustered response; she wasn't going to admit anything to anyone who knew her real name.

"Possibly," the man said, his mind firmly on the gun in his coat, hoping he could distract Pearl long enough to get the drop on her. "It's no surprise to you, I'm sure, that the Bureau and the Company don't get along, any more than they did when your friend Mr. Hoover was alive and well. But an enemy of the state - a traitor - is a traitor regardless of who catches her."

Pearl forced her face into a tight, forceful glare. But her eyes still betrayed fear, regret, uncertainty. Jorge smiled. Slowly, he flipped the bottom of his jacket over his right hand and started moving it
towards his gun.

"I'm not a traitor," Pearl insisted, taking a step back. "I'm a patriot."

Jorge shook his head and laughed. "I'm sure you tell yourself that every day."

"I'm doing what's **right**!" Pearl said, her voice breaking.

"What you **think** is right," Jorge corrected. "There is a difference."

"Stopping the likes of **you** is right," Pearl insisted. She cocked the lever on the shotgun, hoping to intimidate Jorge, who merely chuckled that she'd expelled an unspent shell from her weapon. A dead giveaway that she didn't know the first thing about guns.

Still, it was a shotgun, and those didn't really require skill...he'd have to be careful.

"You're merely contributing to the end of Western Civilization," Jorge said grandly. Besides his own efforts at intimidation, he saw the Short America lifting himself on his knees, and even the Cuban, though bleeding from his injuries, had forced himself to stand. Amethyst stepped closer, brandishing her whip, but at this point it would effectively be three-against-one.

He didn't know where the black one had gone, and didn't care. He already had Pearl more or less where he wanted her. And a whip wouldn't do anything against a gun drawn, cocked and aimed.

"Freedom, democracy, these are pleasant ideas," the Paraguayan said. "But they can only be achieved with a firm hand stopping excesses. Excesses lead to chaos and terror and killing. When we have order, we will have freedom."

"I know the kind of freedom **you** have in mind," Pearl said quietly, the gun starting to lower in her hand.

Jorge smirked again. His hand wrapped around the butt of his pistol.

He looked Pearl in the eyes. And could see that now, she was frightened.

And suddenly, just before he could strike, he couldn't breathe. He felt Amethyst's whip wrapping around his throat, choking him. The gun slid from his hand.

Amethyst pulled him to the ground and struck a blow to the side of his neck. With a strangled cry of pain and surprise, Jorge lost consciousness.

Pearl shook her head and snapped out of her trance. She then turned and saw the American nearing her with his switchblade in hand. Pearl threw her shotgun down and struck him in the belly and groin, then on the back of the neck. He, too, fell unconscious.

That left the Cuban. He was still bleeding from Pearl's saber cuts, but adrenaline and humiliation gave him energy. "**Putas**!" he bellowed. Pearl saw that he had produced a large bolo knife and prepared to slash her with it. Pearl braced herself for impact...

...Then watched as Garnet, suddenly returned, grabbed him and slammed him into the hood of the Lincoln, smashing his head against it until he collapsed in a bloody, unconscious heap.

Pearl looked around at her friends, then at the three fallen villains. Then at the shotgun that she'd thrown to the ground.
"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?" Amethyst asked.

"Let's move these guys out of the way," Garnet suggested. "Can put them in a warehouse a couple blocks away. They shouldn't be harmed."

"Wouldn't it be easier to kill 'em or something?" Amethyst suggested.

Garnet raised her eyebrow, then sighed with irritation. "No, it wouldn't be easier to leave three bodies for the authorities to find, especially if they're connected with the CIA or some foreign governments. A few live and confused and embarrassed men who got their arses kicked by women in an alley and were attacked in the middle of a secret arms deal would be less dangerous. At least in the short term."

"Fine." Amethyst crossed her arms, unconvinced. She put her whip away and started to drag Jorge along the ground. Garnet, meanwhile, opened up the trunk again and placed an explosive device inside.

After they finished, the trio drove home, not speaking to each other for the first several minutes, the radio off. Ordinarily they'd be celebrating their victory, however small it might have been. But Pearl was unnerved that Jorge knew who she was, and how, and her trepidation poisoned the atmosphere.

"Do you really think the CIA is after me?" she finally asked.

"No, but I'll bet the FBI is," Amethyst said. "I mean, they're the ones you betrayed..."

"I didn't betray them!" Pearl screamed, way too loud. "They betrayed common decency! I didn't have a choice..."

"Pearl, no one's blaming you," Garnet said with her usual evenness. "All you did was help some people break into a building and steal some files. Like what you're doing now. If it's right now, it was right then."

Pearl looked down at the floor and sighed. She noticed a tear in her leggings.

"Maybe...Maybe I still need convinced that we're doing the right thing."

Garnet sighed again. Amethyst wanted to butt in, but Garnet silenced her with a hand. This needed tact, something which Amethyst barely possessed.

"Pearl, imagine we hadn't been there," Garnet began. "Imagine one of those guns - really all of them, but let's imagine just one had gone to its destination. Some protester in Paraguay, some writer in Brazil or some leftist in Chile gets killed with that weapon. A life snuffed out by monsters for the mere crime of existing, of thinking. Of being human."

"That is the moral calculus here. That's what we're fighting. We break laws, we hurt people, but we don't kill them. Even when we probably should." (As she said this, she shot Amethyst a glare. The Hispanic woman stuck her tongue out in response.) "We take their guns and their files and destroy them or use them against the baddies before they kill someone. That's what matters."

Pearl considered this for a long moment. Finally, she nodded and smiled, looking her friend in the eye. "I'm sorry, it helps to be reminded sometimes."

"I wouldn't worry about the G-Men coming after you, Pearl," Amethyst said, punching her friend on
the shoulder. "First of all, you're a total badass! Secondly, you have me and Garnet to watch your back."

This made Pearl feel a little better, and she patted Amethyst's hand. But it didn't answer the biggest question.

"Maybe," she said. "But this Project DIAMOND they mentioned..." And her mind instantly, neurotically, paranoiacally went instantly to murders, death squads, assassinations.

"Looking into that can be our next mission," Garnet assured her. "If it concerns you, all the more reason to look into it sooner."

As they drove, the three heard the explosion in the distance. Amethyst cried out in excitement and pumped her fists; Garnet just smiled. Their mission had been a success after all.

But Pearl wasn't comforted at all. Because now she knew someone wanted her dead. And she could only guess who.
Lapis Lazuli

September 17, 1975

Bensalem, PA

Lapis Lazuli woke up around 9:00 am. She intended to be up earlier, because she wanted to get some chores done before her work shift started around noon. Apparently her alarm was dead; she groaned and rolled around in bed, reluctant to wake up if she was going to be late anyway.

*Another slow day in a small town,* she thought. *Another morning shot to hell. Why do I even bother?*

She'd left her shift around 8:00, the usual time, the night before. Feeling restless, she'd stopped by the crummy second-run movie theater, finding that it only showed *Jaws* (which she'd already seen six times) and *The Great Waldo Pepper*. She saw the latter, a cheesy, over-earnest drama with Robert Redford as a stunt pilot, and left with twenty minutes to go. At least she'd come up with a cheesy bon mot for table talk with her coworkers - *The Great Waldo Pepper* isn't so great, after all.

Ha, ha. Lapis, you *are* a cut-up.

Afterwards she walked the streets of the small town, relishing its quaintness. Bensalem wasn't actually that small, but compared to the cities she'd spent the last few years in, it was a goddamn village. She liked listening to the trains whistle through town, looking at the strange hodgepodge of modern businesses and quaint little shops. And just being by herself, clearing her head, being alone with her thoughts. Being able to think about everything and nothing all at once.

When she got back to her place, around 11:00 pm, she had two messages on her machine. One was from Graham Styles, a jerk who worked at the local, and insisted that they get dinner or see "that new Robert Redford movie" (she sighed, long and heavy, at this) together. She cupped her head in her hands, wondering how many more times that she needed to tell this jerkoff that she didn't like him...and that really, she *couldn't* feel the way he wanted her to, anyway.

The other was that weirdo from Congress again - Peridot or something? Another gem. How cute. She took down a note to have her number changed, since moving away again seemed too big a hassle...Those were her last thoughts as she fell asleep.

Finally, after an endless ten minutes rolling around in bed, she finally dragged herself out of bed, took a quick shower and threw on some shorts. She wore a stained old gray T-shirt that wore from her college days. She tried playing around with her hair - the blue dye fading into thin streaks, her natural black showing through - but it wouldn't cooperate without conditioning. Figures.

As she munched on a bowl of cereal, she absently looked at a newspaper from the previous day. And saw the same picture as everyone else: Frank Church (D-ID), holding a CIA heart attack gun up for the camera. She smirked at it, both for the absurdity and the reminder of her new congressional friend, and skimmed down, looking for local news.

Rain later today, she saw. Of course. She could use a sunny day. The mall is still closed for renovations. A Flyers player under arrest for drug possession. An accident on Dunks Ferry Road, two hospitalized. Mayor Rizzo in Philly making racist comments again. A cute human interest story about a little girl who befriended a turkey.

She sighed, just now realizing that the right side of her head hurt like hell. She popped back some
aspirin and sat at the table, staring numbly at the paper without really reading it, wondering what had become of her life.

Outside, she heard the first raindrops starting to patter against the window. She fell into a drowsy trance, still not ready to face the day. Despite the phone calls from Peridot, despite Senator Church staring at her from the newspaper, she tried her best not to think of the past. The present seemed dreary enough.

Lapis didn't know what, if anything, made her choose Bensalem to hide. She didn't have any friends or relatives there, but it seemed off the grid enough to be a good fit. She called herself Larissa Blue, here. If the manager of the restaurant where she worked had suspicions about its authenticity, she didn't register them. She didn't mind her strange-colored hair, nor the tattoo of her namesake gemstone on her upper back. She just needed somebody to clear tables after the summer rush of college kids left.

In public, Lapis - Larissa - was reasonably cheerful despite hating the work and the menial wages and the inevitable jackass customers. Hating that she worked six days a week most weeks, and sometimes seven. Hating that she couldn't really be herself, that she had to look over her shoulder every minute of the day in case someone figured it out.

But then, she asked herself, who was Lapis Lazuli?

A liar. A fraud. Someone who had been dishonest with herself for years. Someone who had hurt people close to her because she wasn't honest. Who had the blood of at least two people on her hands. And God knows how many more.

Someone who hated herself and resented being born every minute of the day.

Lapis's parents had been straight-laced Italian-Americans from Cincinnati, Ohio. She grew up in a household where Mass was observed, a portrait of the Pope hung in the living room, they ate fish on Friday and her father would argue with friends about the virtues and vices of Vatican II. Her dad was a notary and clerk of court, and despite retaining some roughness around the edges was a loving enough father. Her mom was a dutiful housewife who did little more than cook and clean.

Yet Lapis was an only child, and that became a source of friction over time. Her parents fought about it; she was never privy to the details of their arguments, but always caught snide remarks and angry glances at the dinner table, the occasional edges of longer conversation heard down hallways and through open doors at night. The implication being that something was wrong with one or both of them, that her dad was angry that her mom couldn't give them a son, and that mattered more than a daughter, however pretty or well-behaved or accomplished she was.

But they showered her with affection all the same, thinking that, in lieu of a son (a child that mattered, Lapis thought bitterly), they might as well spoil their little daughter with toys and affection and everything she wanted. She never wanted for anything as a kid, except happiness and belonging.

Because Lapis, from an early age, felt different. She had a hard time making friends at school or church. She was shy, preferring the company of animals to people. She loved to swim, and one day surprised a group full of classmates by backstroking across a pond, finishing a good six lengths ahead of the astonished kids.

Yet she refused to try out for the swim team, or anything athletic or sociable at all. She was content
with being the quiet, shy girl who did reasonably well in school, read and listened to music and kept to herself, all through high school. She was a loser, the weird girl with dark hair and olive skin and an inability to look anyone in the eye.

And maybe it was even worse than that. She could still remember a conversation she overheard one day in ninth grade, every word clear as day, like a tape recorder:

"What kind of name is Lapis, anyway?"

"I heard it's a rock or something."

"How weird."

"Of course her name is weird. Her parents are Italian."

"Oh, seriously?"

"Lazuli is a wop?"

"Hey, I could have told you that, just going on the name."

"Why doesn't she go to a Catholic school, then? Why is she here?"

"Maybe they're too poor to attend one."

"Maybe. Or maybe she's trying to bring us down from the inside."

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah, my dad read this book he got from someone at Church. All Catholics are loyal to the Pope, he says. They're plotting to destroy America from the inside. They start with our schools, by making everyone take communion and read from Catholic Bibles. From there, it's a small step to pledging loyalty oaths to the Vatican. All insidious stuff. And it starts with putting one kid in one class..."

And so on. This, six years after John F. Kennedy became President.

But it was more than the learned bigotry of stupid children. Lapis just didn't fit in anywhere. In class, she was silent, taking notes and ignoring the gossip and chatting inevitably swirling around her. She never went to dances or social events.

Even when she made an effort to sit with girls at lunch or talk with them between classes, she was too shy and awkward to make any headway. Their conversation would stall in a morass of mutual awkwardness. After awhile, the other girls stopped trying. They started actively shunning her. And laughing at her.

The ugly girl. The lonely girl. The Italian girl. The weird girl.

All she had going for her, so far as the other kids were concerned, was a decent record collection. Mostly older rock music that her dad liked - the Platters were a favorite, and Buddy Holly, and a few British groups - Manfred Mann and The Kinks. (For some reason, she never got into the Beatles.) She occasionally had kids over to listen to her music or else to borrow records, but they never wanted to chat with her.

They cared about the music, not her. Never her.

So after awhile, she stopped inviting them over. Her parents wondered why, but Lapis didn't tell
them. Better they didn't know.

She only went on one pathetic date as a teenager, with Tony Rizzi, another Italian who went to
church with her, whose dad was friends with her parents. He was handsome enough, but painfully
nervous and awkward, and more than a little selfish. Their date started with him groping her as she
climbed into the car - Lapis was terrified, knowing it was wrong but not knowing what to do about it
-and ended when he vomited a freshly-devoured ice cream sundae on her dress just as he started
making out with her. She never talked to him again.

When she graduated in spring of 1969, Lapis was just glad to get away from home and the kids who
judged and mocked her, the parents who treated her like a toy but didn't really care about her
emotions or feelings. Like so many eighteen year olds, she looked forward to being an adult and
finding a way to reinvent herself on her own terms. Things couldn't possibly be worse.

In college, things seemed different. She hoped it would be different. She attended Miami Ohio, which
wasn't exactly America's biggest or most partying school, but it was a much bigger world than she
was used to. There were enough people on campus, she reasoned to herself, that there must be some
people here she could get along with.

So she went to a party freshman year - October 4th, 1969. She couldn't believe she remembered the
day. She'd been casually invited by a classmate and after a debate with herself, decided to take a
chance. So she threw together the only nice outfit she had - an old white button-down shirt with a
blue skirt that she'd last worn for graduation. It wasn't much, but it was better than a t-shirt and
jeans.

She wasn't especially interested in the music, the usual mixture of rock tunes and protest songs one
might expect, nor in the campus activism that was going on around her. She ignored her vapid
classmates, who waived before turning to ignore her; or the obnoxious students who tried hijacking
the party with conversations about Vietnam and the evils of Richard Nixon.

Instead, she focused on a couple of girls that she spotted in a corner drinking, alone. She bit her lip,
staring for an uncomfortably long time, then moved to join them.

"Hey ladies," Lapis said, forcing out the words.

"Hi," one of them said quietly. She was a petite girl with red hair and glasses, wearing a dark gray
dress with a belt around her waist.

"What's up?" the other, a heavyset Asian girl in a sweater, muttered.

"My name is Lapis," she said, offering her hand to be shaken. The redhead took it after a moment's
hesitation, giggling.

"My name is Catherine," came back the response.

"Anna," the other girl added.

"Are you guys freshmen?" Lapis asked.

"I am, she isn't," Catherine answered.

"I'm a sophomore," Anna said, with a strange hint of pride.

"How'd you end up at this party?" Lapis asked. "You seem so...uncomfortable here."
"Pfft, yeah," Anna said, crossing her arms. "I hate parties. Bad drinks, bad music, lots of creeps and loudmouths and jerks trying to laid. Not my scene at all."

Lapis shook her head slightly. "Then why are you...?"

"It's a good way to get yourself out there," Catherine said, taking a drink. "Networking, I think is what the adults call it? Meeting people can come in handy."

"I guess," Lapis muttered, looking down into her cup.

"Gotta meet people sometime," Catherine muttered, looking down at the floor. Or at Lapis's shoes.

"Especially if they're upperclassmen or people who know people," Anna added. "I mean, look at that turkey over there." She pointed to a doofus-looking boy trying to dance, very badly, to a Jefferson Airplane tune that popped on the radio.

"His name is Marvin Miller," Anna narrated. "His dad owns some sewage treatment company in Columbus. He's on the Governor's utility board. And he's president of the Society of Future Business Owners on campus here. So while he might be ugly of face, dorky of moves and jiggly of ass, getting to know him could come in handy."

"He's not that bad looking," Catherine opined.

"Maybe it's the music making him look bad," Lapis offered.

"What's wrong with Grace Slick?" Catherine laughed.

"Aside from sounding like a mess?" Anna scoffed. "These American rockers don't know shit. All drugs and politics and sex and fuzzy weirdness. The Brits did this style of music first and better."

"I mean, rock and roll's an American art form," Catherine argued.

"No, it's not," Anna said, writing Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly and a million other artists out of the record. "Even if it was at some point, it belongs to the Brits now."

"I like Manfred Mann," Lapis said quietly.

"Manfred Mann?" Anna scoffed. "Seriously? They're like the cheap knock-off version of the Beatles!"

"No, they came before the Beatles!" Lapis pointed out, suddenly animated. "I mean, I guess the Beatles were formed first, but Manfred Mann's first American hit came in 1962, which was a year before the Beatles came over here."

"That can't be right," Anna said, smirking.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Lapis said, shouting. "You don't know anything about rock and roll if you think the British invented it. I've got a whole shelf of records at home proving that you're wrong."

She didn't mean to be that passionate, that angry. But she wasn't used to being challenged on something that she knew more about than most anyone. And it was out now, and she couldn't take it back.

Anna's mouth hung open with shock and irritation. She didn't like being corrected, especially by a freshman like Lapis. After a moment she stormed off, spilling her drink on Lapis's shoes.
"Anna, wait," Catherine said helplessly. She turned back to Lapis, who had retreated back into her shell, shooting Catherine an apologetic glance.

"I'm sorry," Lapis said. "I'm not really good with...you know. It's just...Music is something I like, and...Man, I blew it!"

Catherine smiled. "No, not really," she said. "Anna gets like this. She's kind of a jerk. Like, a lot of the time. Get her talking about science and she'll try convincing you that she was first to split the atom or some shit like that."

Lapis giggled. The first time she'd laughed in weeks.

And Catherine smiled again, drawing nearer and playing with her hair. Was she blushing?

"Lapis, that's a really pretty name," she said. "Like Lapis Lazuli?"

"Exactly like that!" Lapis shouted, surprised and pleased that someone else would get it. "Lazuli's our family name, and I guess my parents just decided to name me after a rock."

"Well, it's a very pretty name," Catherine gushed. And Lapis noticed the freckles on Catherine's face and her deep brown eyes.

"And so unique," she continued. "The Lapis Lazuli is a beautiful stone. Deep blue, like your eyes."

"Aw, thank you," Lapis said, her face crinkling into a smile.

"And you're beautiful, too," Catherine added, shooting her a mischievous glance as she took another drink.

These words made Lapis's head spin. Her smile widened, her heart pounded, and she felt a gush of warmth and acceptance.

It was the first time anyone who wasn't her mom or dad had ever called her beautiful.

Finally, someone liked her!

She wanted to jump up and down and cheer and laugh.

Until her mind registered what this meant.

That a girl liked her.

And all the joy drained from her in an instant, replaced with a knotty sensation, a devastating feeling of panic and self-hatred, in her chest.

She ran to the bathroom, gasping for air, head spinning, with fear and disbelief rather than joy. Her heart pounded in her temples, sweat drenched the back of her neck.

Did she like a girl? She told herself she didn't, that she was crazy, that that was a thing that didn't happen, ever.

But already Catherine's face and red hair and smoldering brown eyes had burrowed into her. And every time the thought flashed into her mind, it gave her a stab of pleasure and longing...instantly buried under an avalanche of regret.
Being a lesbian had never even occurred to her as a possibility. Her parents had never mentioned the possibility to her. She’d never met anyone, man or woman, who liked someone of their own sex.

Who could she talk to about it? No one would understand. She couldn't imagine her dad, Mr. Catholic of the Year, finding it anything unnatural. And her mom...God knows she couldn't keep a secret. And it's not like she had any friends she could confide in.

Except Catherine. Maybe. And that wouldn't help. And what would she say?

After a few minutes, she managed to calm herself down. Managed to control her breath and get her mind straight.

"Okay, Lapis," she said out loud. "You can do this. You're just not used to making friends. That's all this is. That's all she is. Maybe. A friend."

She looked at herself in the mirror, staring at her blue eyes until she'd put herself together.

You're just being silly," she said again, not caring if someone was eavesdropping. She needed to hear it, not just to think it, as if saying the words out loud made them true. "This will pass. She's just a friend."

And she repeated that mantra as she went back out into the party, brushing past two kids arguing over whether Ted Kennedy or George McGovern would make a better president.

Just a friend...Just a friend...Just a friend.

Then she saw Catherine again, smiling at her from across the room. And she realized it wouldn't be that easy.

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**September 17, 1975**

**Washington, DC**

"A-ha!"

Peridot yelled loud enough that she attracted the attention of two grad students and a librarian a few tables over. But she didn't care. She'd spent most of the last two days searching for information on Pearl White, and finally found it!

It took lots and lots of digging at the Library of Congress, sorting through files and newspaper clippings and all sorts of reference materials (not to mention skipping work, pretending she was sick on another day of hearings, as if Senator Dewey needed her for anything important). She hadn't been sure sure how, exactly, she'd find something based on the subject's name, since Pearl wasn't exactly a celebrity or a notorious figure, merely a mid-level bureaucrat who'd been out of the FBI for several years...

Until! Around 11:00 am, she found an old article in the Washington Star, a puff piece about the FBI hiring more female investigators and clerks in August 1963. And there, on Page B2, was a picture of J. Edgar Hoover himself, the ever-obedient Clyde Tolson standing beside him, stiffly shaking the hand of a young, pretty, starstruck Pearl White! Her hair was longer, her face smoother, with an amazingly expressive smile. As if her whole life had led up to this moment. As if all her dreams had been fulfilled.
The caption read: Director J. Edgar Hoover (right) welcomes new hires Pearl White, 25, of Portsmouth, VA, and Eleanor Duane, 23, of Peoria, IL, to the Federal Bureau of Investigation on Monday. The Bureau is making "a concerted effort to hire more female employees, and fine young women such as these will make a wonderful addition to our organization," Mr. Hoover said.

Which didn't tell Peridot much. But it did indicate something. She had been with the Bureau for a little over eight years, yet evidently worked her way into a privileged position. No small thing in an agency where no actual agents served until 1972, and where faithful secretary Helen Gandy was the only woman on Earth the Director trusted. This indicated either one of two things...either Pearl's family was well-connected, or she was preternaturally smart, hard-working and talented.

The only mention of Pearl in the article itself was a quick, formal-sounding quote:

"My whole family has dedicated its life to service," Ms. White, 27, told the Star. "My father served in the Navy during the war and clerked with our local judge, and my late mother was a teacher. I am thrilled to do my part for my country at this critical time."

So, probably not the former.

This story, obviously, didn't tell Peridot much. She remembered that Pearl had left the Bureau sometime in May 1971, but couldn't think of anything that might have precipitated her departure. Maybe a protest over something or other - all sorts of unusual people started to get very political around that time. (The Pentagon Papers were published right after that, right?) More likely, she figured, there was something minor, petty, every day - a dispute with her boss, a breach of etiquette, incompetence even. Something that wouldn't leave a record in newspapers or television, just a black mark in a file somewhere.

But Peridot didn't think so. There had to be a story here. People like Pearl (the driven, poised, hard-working types) don't just leave the FBI for nothing.

So she kept digging.

She remembered that she'd asked Pearl about her job during their interview two days ago. "Between jobs," she had answered mysteriously. She mentioned working briefly as a secretary somewhere in Alexandria since leaving the Bureau, but no real details. (The perils of interrogating someone not under oath; you can't force them to answer questions they don't want to answer.) This made her more suspicious; it further indicated to Peridot that Pearl was hiding something, not merely out of work. But what?

"All right, Pearl White," Peridot muttered to herself, yawning as she reached for another sheaf of files. "Let's find out who you really are."
September 17, 1975

Georgetown, MD

Pearl sat down in her room of the apartment and started typing on her small Smith Corona typewriter. She hadn't been completely honest with Peridot, of course. Why should she be? She wasn't exactly employed full-time, but they needed money and Pearl needed something to do between missions.

So she took on odd jobs that would keep her, more or less, out of the public eye. She worked occasionally as a notary, a copy editor and a freelance typist, taking orders from friends and authors and small organizations who couldn't afford a professional transcription agency. Didn't make her a lot of money, but along with Garnet's salary as a teacher and Amethyst's...however she obtained money, it was enough to pay rent and buy food and maintain their equipment and occasional travel expenses.

What she really wanted to do was to write, rather than merely transcribe and reproduce someone else's words. She had written an 8,000 word story about a former government official who fell in love, discovered a dread secret, then abandoned her post for the greater good...and decided to trash it. First, because it was poorly written - Amethyst, as supportive as she tried to be, laughed at it when she first read the thing (she didn't have the guts to show Garnet) - and second, because it cut too near the bone. She'd have to find some other topic that was less personal.

But how could she avoid it? Her life was dedicated now to Rose's mission, or what she interpreted as Rose's mission. What was, at any rate, her mission. She hoped she was right, but worried about it all the time. And that made it impossible to think of much anything else.

Even her work today, which was merely transcribing a report for a local plumbing company. Still, she tried her best to focus, cranking out a 400 word mini-essay in a matter of minutes. She read it back over quickly, trying to take pride in churning out some banal business jargon in a readable fashion. When that didn't work, she fell back on marveling at her own efficiency.

She heard Garnet and Amethyst coming back from the movies, arguing about the film's social relevance and accuracy.

"...It was fun I guess, but come on, who would believe Sean Connery as an Arab?"

"He was a Berber, Amethyst, not an Arab. They are completely different ethnic groups."

"Sorry, Ms. Professor of African Studies."

"I don't teach African Studies, though I don't see why you would consider it an insult. But yes, I consider it important to distinguish between different racial and ethnic groups because they are not an undifferentiated mass. The movie even made a point of distinguishing between the two, which impressed me."

"Sure, but it's Sean Connery. I'm sure you're gonna complain about brownface or racial appropriation..."
"The movie has larger problems than that, like it's treating war and imperialism as something to celebrate rather than a scourge on the world. But at the very least they acknowledged that politics in the Middle East is more complicated than just terrorists and oil sheikhs. So, a small step in the right direction from reliably reactionary Hollywood."

"Plus that sword fight on the beach was badass! Pearl would have loved it!"

Pearl was amused that Garnet, who usually seemed so stoic and together, could get flustered discussing any work of art. She remembered her trashing the works of Philip Roth as misogynist nonsense (Pearl just thought they were gross and unreadable), all Westerns as racist, and having complicated opinions on blaxploitation films, both as a means of liberation for long-repressed black audiences (which Pearl expected) and an infantilizing macho fantasy (which she didn't). Frankly, she was surprised that she wasn't getting more upset over a white guy playing a non-white character, but she wasn't about to walk in to the next room and point that out.

Nonetheless, she tried to drown out her friends and looked to the next letter on her pile. It had a patriotic emblem (an eagle with an American flag) stamped on it, and she instinctively threw it out.

She sighed, listening to her friends’ argument continue on and spill over into non-film areas. And looked at her sword on the mantle. The motto and the rose emblem inscribed on the blade. She read it again.

Fidelity. Bravery. Integrity.

The words leaped out at her now like a sick joke, a mockery of her past.

And then she looked down at a picture of herself with Rose at a party, Pearl looking uncharacteristically loose and happy in a loose-fitting dress shirt and pearl necklace, unbuttoned to show her a hint of cleavage. And Rose, large and joyful and radiant, her red hair a shaggy mess, wearing a hippie blouse and large, bouncy gold necklace and giving the camera a thumb's up.

At least I'm still being loyal to someone, Pearl thought as she went back to the pile and pulled out a job offer from a less reactionary client.

She fed a fresh piece of paper into the machine and started typing again, the clacking of the keys drowning out Garnet and Amethyst's conversation, but not her thoughts.

"Fidelity. Bravery. Integrity. That isn't just a motto for us. I expect truthfulness and loyalty from all of my agents, and I expect it from my employees regardless of where they work and what they do. You ladies are representatives of your country as much as they are, and I expect you will follow the high standards I've set for everyone at the Bureau."

Pearl couldn't help feeling proud and overwhelmed that day. She wore a light pink shirt that matched her hair, freshly cut and coiffed into waves, a black skirt, and a modest pearl necklace. Just 25 years old, fresh out of law school, and she was working as a typist for the FBI! And here was J. Edgar Hoover, the master G-Man himself, meeting with him and twelve other lady typists, inducting them into the Bureau.

Sure, being a typist wasn't exactly what Pearl dreamed about as a kid, listening to cop shows on the radio, watching Dragnet on television and reading mountains of true crime stories. But she realized that only men, in 1963, could be agents. And after her frustrating experiences trying to find work as a legal clerk ("Sorry honey, but we prefer a man for this sort of work" went a typical rejection from a Richmond law firm), Pearl the Girl from Portsmouth would take anything in proximity to crime
Mr. Hoover was flanked by his two leading assistants: Clyde Tolson, the ever-present Number Two man (who seemed much more like a sweet older man than his boss, who seemed like a rabid bulldog playing nice) and Helen Gandy, the Director’s equally stern, humorless secretary, who even now could barely muster a smile for her new employees.

"Hello, young lady," Hoover said, grasping the hand of a petite young woman. "What do they call you?"

"Eleanor Duane," she said shyly as a camera flashed beside them.

"Welcome to the Bureau," he said curtly. "I know you won't let us down."

Not even a pretense of warmth, beyond the most pained, insincere smile Pearl had ever seen.

And so Hoover made his way down the line, Pearl fidgeting in place.

"Your name?" Hoover asked a tall brunette just down the line.

"Louise Schaal, sir," she said in a piping voice.

"Your file says you're from Denver?"

"Yes, sir."

"Glad to see the Western states represented here. I know you won't let me down."

He seemed less enthused by the next girl, a blonde in a polka dot blouse who kept hopping up and down.

"What do they call you?" Hoover asked, irritation creeping into his voice.

"Peggy Royal, sir," she said.

Hoover reached out his hand to shake it, then noticed that the collar of her blouse was slightly wrinkled...and worse, a fleck of lint on her chest. His eyes bulged with terrifying exaggeration. Pearl saw Tolson lick his lips nervously, unsure of what to do. Miss Gandy's already stern face furrowed into a savage frown.

Pearl self-consciously fumbled about with her hands, making sure that her outfit was as neat as it could be. She cursed herself for not wearing a blouse over her outfit.

"Welcome aboard, Peggy," Hoover said, shaking hands without enthusiasm.

Pearl's heart practically jumped into her throat as the Director's bulldog visage hovered into her line of sight.

"Welcome to the Bureau, young lady," Hoover said, offering his hand. Her heart aflutter, Pearl accepted it and shook it madly, eliciting slight laughter from Hoover and Tolson. Pearl could see the photographer feeding a new flashbulb into his camera beside them.

"What is your name?" Hoover asked.

"Pearl," she managed. "Pearl White."
"Pearl White," Hoover said. "What an interestingly appropriate name. Ms. Gandy tells me you went to law school."

Pearl shivered with pride that Hoover would know this about her. "Yes, sir! Graduated third in my class at William & Mary just a year ago."

"Well, we are extremely lucky to have such a bright, hard-working gal like you here with us," Hoover said, his smile broader now, seeming almost sincere. "Especially one from the South. We only accept the best, but I'm sure you could have guessed that since you're here."

"Thank you, sir," Pearl said, instinctively curtsying.

The moment seemed to be over. But Hoover lingered another moment, clasping her hand again, wordlessly this time, smile fixed on his face, until Pearl started feeling uncomfortable. Wondering if she'd missed some detail in her outfit during her quick self-test, or if the Director was implying some other interest in her...

Mercifully, the camera flashed again, and the spell broke.

Despite the Director's words, Pearl wasn't strictly Southern by birth, background or temperament. Her father was from New York and her mom from California, so she never really picked up the Tidewater accent shared by her classmates, something that always made her stand out. That she spent much of the '40s moving around the country during her father's Naval service hurt; she picked up a strangely a-regional form of polished diction that always made her seem like the smartest person in a room.

Which she usually was. Pearl was brilliant from an early age, and despite her tomboyish love for crime stories and pulp novels, her lust for exercise (not least fencing, which she picked up one summer as a perpetually bored fourteen year old) which left her with a perpetually trim figure, she always valued her own intelligence, leaving her precociously poised and, it must be said, not a little arrogant and self-impressed. This was mostly the doing of her mother, a teacher who instilled a love for learning in Pearl, and whose tragic early death left her devastated, clinging to her intellect as her closest, firmest tie to her mother.

Her dad tried picking up the slack, but as a career Navy officer he didn't have the necessary equipment. What he mostly instilled in Pearl, and her two much younger brothers, was a strong respect for authority, a belief that the law was right, that the government must be trusted, that our leaders are heroes and anyone who defies them, be they foreigners, criminals, subversives or deviants, as evil.

In that sense, Pearl was perfect for the FBI.

And so, after fighting her way through law school and suffering the pain of rejection in reputable law firms, she finally found what she hoped would be her dream job. Her father, now a Captain, was so proud when he'd heard the news. When Pearl arrived home to tell him, he gave her a crushing bear hug.

"I've served my country for the past 24 years," Captain White reminded Pearl. "And I'm so glad to see you carrying on the tradition. Just remember to be honest, be decent, and be truthful. To your country, to your family, to God, but most importantly, to yourself. Always."

Pearl nodded gratefully for the advice, tears brimming in her eyes. She'd never been especially close to her dad, but his pride and acceptance meant so much to her right now. She hoped that she'd
never give him reason not to be proud of her.

America in summer of 1963 only seemed innocent in retrospect. The race riots and assassinations that would scar the decade were already appearing; it hadn't been two months since a Mississippi racist shot Medgar Evers in his driveway, the same day President Kennedy announced a need for civil rights legislation. There was much fear that Martin Luther King's March on Washington, far from a peaceful protest, would incite violence, rioting, even a full-on race war (certainly J. Edgar Hoover feared as much, labeling King "the most dangerous Negro of the future in this nation"). And Birmingham, Alabama, site of that state's first desegregated schools, was about to explode in violence, a bombing, then savage riot marked by fire hoses and bulldogs and scenes from a fascist state - all on television.

Two days after Pearl met J. Edgar Hoover, police in New Orleans arrested a young troublemaker named Lee Harvey Oswald for handing out pro-Communist leaflets. Internationally, the announcement of a nuclear test ban treaty with the USSR seemed a step in the right direction, but didn't do much to relieve the reality of a maddening nuclear stalemate. Many who'd never heard of a small Asian country called South Vietnam were shocked by Ngo Dinh Diem using the Army to crackdown on Buddhist dissidents. Soon afterwards, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge would tell President Kennedy that "we are launched on a course from which there is no turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government."

It was a world gone mad, but not yet aware that it had.

Meanwhile, Pearl settled into her job comfortably. After a few days of training by Ms. Gandy and one of her assistants, a slightly more cheerful woman named Marge, Pearl and the new typists set to work. Most of their job was banal, typing and transcribing reports and information requests from other agencies. It rarely afforded Pearl much excitement, but it was easy, decent work that paid well. And doing it for the FBI made her feel important, however tedious the job was.

She got along reasonably well with her coworkers. Eleanor was shy but friendly, though her conversations with Pearl hinted at an interior life that she could only hint at. Louise was very outspoken and enjoyed telling jokes, often naughtily coarse ones, her voice and laughter caroling throughout the office. Marge, their supervisor, indulged her humor except when Ms. Gandy visited the office, which wasn't often.

Only Peggy Royal was a problem.

On her fourth day in the office, she showed up with a ruffled skirt and a bad attitude. Claimed that she'd been out drinking the night before, that her boyfriend had left her and she was in no mood to be working - or for Hoover's petty rules.

"Peggy, I would suggest that you fix your skirt as best you can," Marge said as politely as she could. "Ms. Gandy will probably fire you if you don't. You know how high the standards here are..."

Peggy shot her boss a defiant look. "Thanks for letting me know," she said acidly, then pointed pulled up her skirt and wrinkled it as much as she could, giving deliberate offense.

"Peggy, I'm not joking," Marge said, adopting a stern tone. "Fix your skirt, now."

"Congratulations," Peggy said scornfully as she straightened her outfit. "You sound just like Ms. Gandy." She patted down the crease in her skirt, making an earnest though obviously resentful effort to comply.
"Is that sufficient?" she asked. Pearl looked over at Louise, who simply gawked at their coworker open-mouthed.

Marge simply nodded, unable to form words as she went back to her desk. Peggy turned to her coworkers and smiled, proud for standing up for herself and spitting just a little venom back at the Bureau hierarchy.

It backfired. Because word of Peggy's insouciance made it back to Ms. Gandy in short order, then to the Director. Peggy was fired, reportedly at Hoover's personal order, that very afternoon. She didn't even have a chance to clear out her desk, being escorted by two security guards.

Pearl was furious and thought about protesting the injustice. She talked to her friends during a coffee break and tried convincing her fellow typists to join her in a protest.

"I'm not saying Peggy shouldn't be reprimanded or punished," Pearl insisted. "But firing her this soon into her job over something so small and petty seems...wrong."

"Pearl," Louise insisted. "we just started here. There's no way we're gonna stand up to J. Edgar Hoover over a new girl who was mouthy and rude and sloppily dressed."

"We work at the pleasure of the Bureau," Eleanor insisted, sounding like a robot. "If Peggy's not gonna measure up to the standards, she deserves to go. Period."

Pearl was shocked at her coworkers' bluntness, her inability to empathize with someone whose only fault was an improperly pressed skirt. But she felt so helpless - alone. No one would do the right thing. But because it was a rule, even a petty one, Pearl wasn't even sure it was the right thing.

"I guess you're right," Pearl said, though internally she wasn't at all convinced.

"Good thing Peggy distracted from my messy hair," Louise said, switching into her joker mode. "Somehow managed to spill pomade in it last night and had to clean it out with soap and a hair brush. Yuck!"

Pearl laughed hollowly, still thinking about Peggy. Still wondering how even J. Edgar Hoover could think it was worth ruining a girl's life over something petty. Wondering if they could be wrong about something so small, whether they might not be wrong about other things.

It didn't seem fair. But it was the rule.

And if Pearl White knew how to do anything, it was how to follow the rules.

Chapter End Notes

Hoover was notoriously obsessed with the appearances of his employees. I don't know if he'd have been as strict about his female secretaries as his male agents (he would fire agents for improper dress and haircuts, or even for being taller than him!) but I found it an acceptable bit of dramatic license. Most of my scenes of Hoover's FBI draw on Curt J. Gentry's J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets (1991); Tim Weiner's Enemies: A History of the FBI (2012); and Betsy Metsger's The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI (2014).

Trivia disclosure: the movie Garnet and Amethyst discuss is The Wind and the Lion,
one of my personal favorites even if it's guilty of all the sins Garnet mentions. Anyway, this fic will take a brief hiatus for the next few days, hopefully picking back up this weekend. Thanks again to everyone who is still reading; all reviews, kudos and bookmarks are deeply appreciated!
September 19, 1975

Pearl hadn't thought much about her testimony over the past few days. She had been wrapped up in her work and her thoughts about their recent mission. The revelation that she had some connection to a special project, whispered about by South American reactionaries in dark alleys, unnerved her deeply. Made her wonder if she was wanted for something more than just an unsolved burglary four years ago. She knew she'd done far worse, in the eyes of the law, since then.

But no. Her identity was a closely-guarded secret to everyone except Garnet and Amethyst. No one she took on as a transcriptionist would know - could know - that she was a vigilante at night. She made sure of it!

Still, the possibility always nagged at her that someone she and the other Gems encountered knew her. Through the FBI or from Media or somewhere else. Or someone had, at the very least, traced her back from the job to her home.

Certainly, if that weird, annoying congressional staffer had been able to find her, someone really determined could. And she knew what she knew, which might be more than enough, even if that dirty laundry was now being aired in the press and the Capitol Building every day. Better to keep her head down, she thought, and act normal until they found something concrete.

As if on cue, the telephone rang.

She let it ring, hoping that Garnet or Amethyst would pick up. She hated talking on the telephone, especially when it wasn't someone she knew. Especially when she suspected that someone might be watching, or at least investigating her.

Then remembered that they had gone out to do...something. They were always vague with each other, perhaps for security reasons (better to not know everything your pals are up to until they've done it), perhaps because they relished playing at spies. Though Amethyst at least implied that it was scouting for a future mission or possibly a follow-up on their last.

Pearl sighed and finally went into the lobby to pick up the phone.

"Hello," Pearl answered.

"Pearl White?" The voice sounded familiar, but Pearl couldn't place it.

"Yes. Who's calling?" Pearl answered, adopting her officious FBI voice.

"I knew I knew you from somewhere!" Now she knew who it was - that nasal voice was unmistakable. "We met back in 1969, I think! Visited the FBI Building with a student group, and you gave a lecture about what women do in the Bureau."

"I'm surprised you remembered that," Pearl said, affecting a laugh. She sure didn't remember it.

"Aww man, Washington really is a small town! You're in Georgetown, right? Maybe I can swing down there and meet you later today, if you're not doing anything." Then, almost as an afterthought,
"I'm sorry, this is Peridot Khoury."

Pearl rolled her eyes and audibly groaned. She struggled to retain her even tone.

"Ms. Khoury, was it? I'm sorry, but I already told you and Mr. Cartwright everything that I know. We have nothing more to discuss."

She maintained her even tone, but inside she grew angry. Who the hell was this Peridot to harass her like this? Did they know something about her past?

Then she wondered if Peridot might be involved with this Project DIAMOND in some way. And her paranoia and worry naturally came rushing back.

It didn't seem likely. But it would explain why she was calling out of the blue several days after she'd told Peridot they had nothing to discuss, and given her no reason to think otherwise.

No, she convinced herself. This is just a staffer being extra-nosy. That's their job, God bless them. But it was still irritating.

"But I wanted to discuss..."

"Ma'am, if you want me to answer more questions, have your boss issue me a subpoena," Pearl interrupted. "That's fully within your rights to do. Otherwise, you are harassing me and I'll insist that you please stop contacting me. If I hear from you again, I'll insist that you speak to my attorney."

(A bluff, of course - Pearl had no attorney.)

There was a pause on the other end. Pearl waited anxiously for Peridot hang up, her hand trembling. She decided to let the aide terminate the conversation, fearing that her slamming the phone down would merely invite a call back.

Finally, a sigh came through the other end.

"Ms. White...color me curious," Peridot finally said. "I know you must have known things at the FBI that were very damaging, or else you wouldn't have ended up on our list as a person of interest."

Our list...again, Pearl thought back to her confrontation a few nights ago. She couldn't help making the connection, even though it seemed preposterous.

"So I suspect there's a lot more to your story than you're telling me," Peridot continued. "And that's fine! I can understand your reluctance to discuss it in a formal setting. Maybe you'll feel more comfortable talking it over lunch or coffee or somewhere we can just be two people."

"I don't think so," Pearl said, hoping her curtness would end the conversation. But Peridot insisted on plowing forward, becoming more animated and agitated as she spoke.

"But, if you insist, I will talk to Senator Dewey and our counsel, Mr. Schwartz to request a subpoena. Then you can have your whole life story and all your secrets spelled out on national television. Everyone in the United States will know everything there is to know about you. And so, in trying to keep secrets from one person you'll have them spilled out before 200 million people!"

Pearl hadn't thought of that. She bit her lip but didn't respond.

Then Peridot's voice slipped back into a calmer note. "But I know you don't want that, and honestly, I don't either. I just want to talk some things over with you, man to man. Or woman to woman, as it
were. No subpoena, no record, nothing I'm gonna disclose to anyone unless it's, like, treason or something like that. Just want to figure out what makes you tick. And, you know, maybe protect you in case someone else gets around to asking questions."

Pearl pinched the bridge of her nose and groaned. This kid was good.

Pearl argued with herself for a long, anxious moment about whether to cooperate or not. If she already knew Pearl's phone number, and her address, it probably didn't matter what she did. Unless she picked up stakes and moved somewhere else, which was an option in extremis, but not one to make Garnet or Amethyst happy.

"Is there a phone number where I can reach you?" Pearl asked finally. "I will call you back later today and we'll set something up."

"Why not now?" Peridot insisted.

"Now doesn't work for me," Pearl responded. "Have some work to do."

"I understand," Peridot said. "Please call me at my home number, which is 555-740-3331. I'll stop by during my lunch break to check the messages."

Pearl scribbled the number down on a scrap of paper. "Okay. If we're able to meet, I'll give you a time and place in the message."

She realized it would be risky, but at this point, what did she have to lose?

"Great. Thanks, Pearl. Really, I'm sorry for coming on so strong but...I've got your best interests at heart."

"Uh-huh." And Pearl finally hung up the phone, furious and frustrated.

_"My best interests? You don't even know anything about me other than what's in your little file, Peridot. Or maybe you do. Either way, how would you even know what my best interests were?"

Still, Pearl thought, she's offering a way out. Or it was a trap. Though since it was a public place, maybe not.

Might as well feed her some bullshit and get her off my back. Or see what she knows.

Pearl looked in a mirror and straightened out her ruffled hair a bit. She looked then at her rumpled sweatshirt and sighed. She was really hoping that she wouldn't have to go out or dress up today...another black mark against this Peridot. Now she'd have to find a nice outfit to go out.

_Too bad I can't really bring a saber into a cafe,_ Pearl reflected ruefully. At the very least, she expected that she'd want to use it by the end of their conversation.

"_Nobody_ trusts _anybody_ in DC any more, man," Bismuth told Garnet. "Not like even six years ago when you could at least trust the brothers and sisters. Now everyone's on the goddamn FBI's payroll and nobody knows who's a spy and who's a crook and who's a cop and a square and who's up to what or on whose side. Crazy."

"This country is sick," Garnet agreed. Amethyst hung back, chewing on a beef stick and examining Bismuth's wares. "All the dirty laundry's getting aired now and America can't stand it."
"Well, Tricky Dick was good for something then," Bismuth smiled.

Bismuth ran a small pawnshop in DC, mostly selling guns and newspapers. And sometimes both. Garnet admired the decor - once staid and nondescript, now it bristled with symbols of radicalism - an African flag, portraits of Huey Newton and Muhammad Ali, Che Guevara's death photograph, posters for Shaft and Foxy Brown, a broadside featuring Bernadette Dohrn and Bill Ayers' mugshots. The only "respectable" person on display was Bobby Kennedy, the one politician radicals were still allowed to like. Mostly because he was dead.

"You wanna hear something ridiculous?" Bismuth said. "This is how bad it's got lately. The other day this white boy came in, all clean-cut and wearing a goddamn suit, in the middle of downtown DC. Asking me if I sold suppressors and machine guns. I mean, no discretion, no codes, no beating around the bus. Just came in and asked me to my face, "do you have silencers?" Like they're something you can buy at the supermarket. Can you believe that?"

"Stupid pigs," Garnet said scornfully.

Bismuth shook her head. "See, the DC police at least try to blend in. They at least look the part. This cat though, he was fucking begging to get popped. Probably ATF or FBI. Or maybe a real small time hood tryin' to look important. We get those, too. If Chris had been here" - Bismuth's boyfriend - "I don't think he woulda walked out here."

"And what is Chris up to these days?"

"The usual, I guess. Trying to get his restaurant off the ground, but it's not a good market to open a small business right now. Stagflation affects us as much as it does Wall Street - probably worse."

"Shame to hear that." Garnet looked over the desk at Bismuth and the two exchanged a friendly glance.

"So Garnet, you ready to trade in that old Winchester for a new shotgun?" Bismuth asked.

"Nah, I'm still getting mileage out of it," Garnet said. "My ears are still ringing from using it the other night."

"Ahh." Bismuth never asked what clients like Garnet and Amethyst did with their merchandise. Better she didn't know.

"What about you, Amethyst?" Bismuth called to Garnet's partner, who had stopped browsing wares and was watching a silent TV in the corner.

"Don't think I've seen this show," Amethyst said. "Is it Rockford Files?"

"Kojak, I think," Bismuth said. "The one with the bald guy from that James Bond movie."

"Oh, the dude who sucks the lollipops?" Amethyst asked as she sucked on her meat stick in imitation. "Yeah, I think I have seen this before."

"It ain't Streets of San Francisco, but it's not bad either."

"People actually like that show?" Amethyst made a face as Telly Savalas's shiny dome appeared on the screen.

"Well anyway, if you're not here for guns, and I assume you're not hear to talk TV," Bismuth said. "What can I help you with?"
"We need to see Saphire," Garnet said, leaning on the counter.

Bismuth bristled, staring at her for a moment in shock and disbelief. She knew her friend only asked for Saphire's help in the direst of emergencies.

"I'll see if she's in," she said finally, betraying a hint of fear. And she stepped into the back through a beaded curtain.

"Why do we need Saphire again?" Amethyst asked, sidling up to Garnet.

"Pearl's in trouble," Garnet responded. "I don't know what this DIAMOND thing is that Jorge was talking about, but it's serious if creeps like him are involved in any way. If anyone does now, it's gotta be Saphire."

Bismuth stepped back out and unlatched the opening to the counter.

"All right, she'll see you," Bismuth said, gesturing behind the curtain. As Garnet and Amethyst went back, Bismuth hurried to the front of the store and switched the CLOSED sign to OPEN.

Nobody knew who Saphire was or what exactly she did. Befitting her name, she wore a bright blue dress and had long, flowing blonde hair. She sat with legs folded on a rug in the middle of the darkened room, lighting a candle. Her constant companion Ruby, a tough but short Asian woman, stood beside her with her arms folded, fully prepared to pound anyone who hurt her beloved.

Saphire acted like a psychic or an oracle, and truth be told she had made money off the psychic predictions racket in the past. (She had published a book, Eighty-Nine Predictions for 1973 by Sapphire Blue, which correctly predicted the winners of the Oscars, the World Series and the Super Bowl, but incorrectly predicted plague in California, John Wayne's death and a nuclear war between Russia and China. Either way, it sold 250,000 copies.) Fleecing the gullible who wanted certainty in an insane world was definitely lucrative, even if she found the work distasteful. But it wasn't her fault that there was a demand for soothing lies and reassuring fables.

Yet most of her information was more prosaic than that - and far more useful. She somehow had the inside scoop on a lot of baffling things: Beltway gossip, law enforcement chatter, crime reports, business transactions and diplomatic chess moves. Things that required many contacts in high places and inside sources, things that couldn't be gleaned from listening to police scanners and scanning newspapers and trade papers. Sometimes she charged for the information, unless she considered you a friend.

And Garnet, at least, was a friend.

"Garnet, Amethyst, nice to see you again," she said in an otherworldly voice. Then she cried out as the flame on her match burned her fingers, and hastily shook it out. Ruby rushed forward with a glass of water, but Saphire merely dropped the match into the water and waved her off.

"We're sorry to bother you, Saphire," Garnet said, standing before her. She waited to say more until Saphire gestured her and Amethyst to sit down in front of her.

"You know we don't ask for your help unless something's seriously wrong," Garnet continued. "But we've come across some disturbing information."

"You were involved in that skirmish up on U Street the other night," Saphire said calmly.

"Whoa, how do you know that?" Amethyst gasped.
"I have my ways," Sapphire responded mysteriously.

"Dude, we're not here for riddles," Amethyst demand. "No offense, but if you know, some other people know, too."

"Amethyst," Garnet hissed, elbowing her friend.

"That conclusion is correct," Sapphire said, smiling. "You made page C3 of the Washington Post, so your actions are getting attention. It doesn't take a psychic to read the newspaper."

"That concerns us a bit," Garnet admitted. "But what's more troubling is what we found out. One of the goons we encountered mentioned that our friend Pearl was involved in something called Project DIAMOND."

"Who was this goon?" Sapphire asked.

"Not sure. Pearl thinks he's with DINA, Pinochet's military intelligence. I believe he mentioned being from Paraguay originally. But regardless, he's someone dangerous and well-connected."

"Hmm." Sapphire sat back and closed her eyes, as if meditating. Garnet sat silently, watching her concentrate, while Amethyst crossed her arms and stared at Ruby. The two tough girls scowled at each other, harmlessly letting off steam.

"Did your friend testify in front of the Church Committee? That's the obvious one. I know she used to work for the FBI."

"She didn't testify," Amethyst said. "Not under oath. She met with an investigator though, right?"

Garnet nodded.

"Ah." Sapphire said, like that explained everything. Then sat in silence for another meditative moment, causing Amethyst to audibly growl.

"You remember the bombing the other day?" Sapphire finally said. "The Chilean diplomat who was assassinated right near the Capitol."

Garnet and Amethyst nodded, then exchanged a worried glance.

"He had met with Committee investigators just an hour earlier," Sapphire continued. "From what I gather, he didn't have much information that could be helpful to them, or at least not information they found interesting. But it's known that he was a member of Allende's government and had been trying to expose American connections to Pinochet's coup."

Garnet quickly put two and two together, then felt her stomach clench in terror. If this man was on a list with Pearl...things were even more serious than she'd previously thought.

"Do you know what Project DIAMOND is?" Garnet asked.

"Hmm." Sapphire said again, closing her eyes.

"Oh come on!" Amethyst burst out. "You don't have to put on the act for us."

"Hey, show some respect!" Ruby snapped, pulsing with rage. "She's doing you guys a favor and we don't need any of your fucking lip!"

"Can it, short stuff!" Amethyst said, standing up with her fists clenched. "Epigrams and riddles aren't my idea of a favor."
"How about I flatten you, would that be a favor?"

Sapphire stoically waved her hand, imploring Ruby to back off and Amethyst to sit back down. Ruby bowed in apology and kissed the back of Sapphire's hand. She still shot Amethyst a furious scowl as she backed into the shadows.

"I don't know exactly what Project DIAMOND is," Sapphire said finally. "Could be any number of things. But it's not hard to see a common thread between your friend and this Chilean victim. They were both potential witnesses to the Committee. They both know things that could be damaging to the US government."

"So you think that the government put Pearl on a hit list?" Amethyst asked.

"Possibly," Sapphire said. "But it probably wouldn't be the government itself. They're too careful in this day and age to hire goons to rub people out like some kind of mob operation."

"Then who?" Garnet asked.

"There are groups loosely affiliated with the government who act on their own, without official sanction or even knowledge. Groups that even the FBI and CIA fear. Groups that make the President unable to sleep at night. And groups that don't want thirty years of misdeeds to come to light - and might do anything to stop them."

Garnet felt anxiety surge through her body. She struggled to maintain her stoic pose, pondering what that meant for her friend, and for her and Amethyst as well.

"I don't know anything for sure," Sapphire continued. "But if you give me a day or two, I might be able to find out more."

"Thank you, Sapphire," Garnet said, standing up to leave. Amethyst bolted upright, looking ready for a fight with whoever might mess with their friend.

"Maybe I should buy a new piece from Bismuth before we leave," Amethyst said as they prepared to leave. "At least a handgun. What kinda gun goes good with a whip?"

But Garnet was too worried about Pearl to answer.

Chapter End Notes

Psychics, fake or otherwise, were all the rage in the mid-'70s, and what better job for Sapphire with her Future Vision? Imagine a cross between Jeane Dixon, Deep Throat and your average hippie chick and you've got Sapphire. Ruby, of course, remains very much her own gem.
Pearl grumbled to herself as Peridot walked into the restaurant. She still wore what looked like work clothes - a dress shirt with a black skirt, and incredibly thick glasses, her blonde hair a mess. Then Pearl looked at her own, similar outfit - a flared white shirt with a denim skirt - and realized she didn't look much better. But then she was old enough not to care over much about being stylish.

"Thanks for meeting me," Peridot said with strange enthusiasm. She practically bounced into the booth across from Pearl, shaking it.

"Well, it's not like you gave me a choice," Pearl snapped, looking down at her nails as a waitress stepped over and gave them menus.

"If you think about it, you didn't give me much choice," Peridot responded after their waitress stepped away. "I didn't find your testimony terribly forthright, and I wanted to give you the opportunity to clear the air and straighten things out."

What a mouth on this one, Pearl thought to herself, resenting Peridot even more than she had before. Who does she think she is?

"Now, just so we're clear," Peridot said officiously, folding her hands and leaning forward. "This isn't on the record. This isn't being taped. Obviously, I'm not an officer of a court or anything. No formality. Just...you know, let's talk, woman to woman."

"My, that's a relief," Pearl said sarcastically. "I was a little worried that you might drag a stenographer into the booth with us."

To her surprise, Peridot laughed. "Well, that would be handy! But no, this is more...just curiosity more than anything."

This did intrigue Pearl a little bit. Though it also made her suspicious. At least if Peridot was working on behalf of some senator, she'd be constrained in what she could ask and, realistically, what she could do about it.

"What made you curious about me?" Pearl asked, reluctantly offering Peridot a line as she leaned backwards.

"Just, you know, your background is fascinating. Navy brat, law school, typist and secretary for the FBI, then you suddenly quit without explanation and disappear from sight. Guess that's what landed you on our list. We wanted to get to the bottom of that."

Pearl leaned backwards, locked her shoulders together, stroked her forearms as she spoke. "Maybe there are some things that I'm not comfortable sharing with others. Or, frankly, that are none of your business."

"Granted," Peridot said, seeming oblivious to her discomfort. "And I'm not gonna ask you about your sex life or anything scandalous like that."

Well, there isn't one to ask about lately, Pearl thought sourly.

"What makes you think I'm gonna share anything with you?" Pearl demanded.
"Well, for a start," Peridot said, a broad grin on her face, "I'm gonna buy you something to eat."

As if on cue, a waitress came by. And Pearl decided to take the weird young woman up on her offer.

"Is it too early for lunch?" Peridot asked. "Because I'm not really in the mood for eggs or bacon or whatever."

"We started serving lunch a few minutes ago," the waitress said. "Of course, it might take a little extra time to prepare because we're still getting the food ready."

"That's okay," Peridot said, looking at Pearl and smiling. "We've got plenty of time."

_Ugh_, Pearl thought again, rolling her eyes and wishing Garnet and Amethyst were here, too. _What is she playing at?_

Pearl picked at a corned beef sandwich as they talked, not really tasting the meat or the sandwich or even the hot mustard as they talked. Peridot devoured her club sandwich in a few quick bites and munched noisily on her fries, still oblivious to Pearl's annoyance and discomfort.

"So, what made you want to join the FBI?" Peridot said, wiping some ketchup from the corner of her mouth.

"Oh, it just seemed like a cool thing to do," Pearl said grumpily. "I mean, I grew up listening to radio shows and reading crime novels and I thought, why not me?"

"Very interesting thing for a woman to be into," Peridot noted as she scarfed down another French fry. "What did your parents think?"

"My father actually was very supportive," Pearl said. "Of course, he's a career sailor so he liked that I was getting into government in some capacity. It was beyond him to think of me as anything more than a typist, like anyone else, but that's the way things were. How they _still_ are, most places."

"Bummer," Peridot said, with a flippancy that annoyed Pearl further.

"Well, can I round that question back on you?" Pearl asked, feeling she'd offered enough of herself for now. "What made _you_ want to work for a senator?"

"It's kind of a long story," Peridot said, belching and taking a sip of soda. "Basically, I lived in a small town called Beach City in Delmarva. Little resort area on the Chesapeake, nothing to write home about. I had a summer internship with Mayor Dewey, who wasn't the greatest politician ever, but seemed about right for that kind of place. And, you know, he had me do all this secretarial stuff and meet with constituents and handle his calls and arrange all these meetings and task forces and events and blah, blah, blah.

"And, you know what? I liked it. I was surprised but I really enjoyed helping people. Making a difference. And so when he ran for the Senate..."

"Oh yes, Dewey was the one who no one expected to be elected," Pearl said, thinking it a cutting insult.

"Exactly!" Peridot said, clapping her hands together. "He only ran because it was a sure Republican seat and the state Democratic Party couldn't get anyone to run against the incumbent. And then Watergate happened and he won by 114 votes! Pretty incredible, huh? I was gonna try for grad school somewhere, but he offered me a slot on his staff when he came to DC, and what could I say!?"
"Lucky you," Pearl said.

"I think so," Peridot said, still excited. She drew back a little now, finally starting to pick up on Pearl's disdain.

"Hmm. Is that why you think I'm gonna cooperate with you?" Pearl asked.

Peridot shrugged and leaned backwards. "Maybe?" she said, after a pause. "I mean, I think it's the right thing to do."

"I'm sure you do," Pearl hissed with condescension. "You would said that, wouldn't you, working for Congress?"

"Probably," Peridot agreed. "But it's more than that. We're doing important work. We're trying to expose everything bad that the government has gotten away with over the past few decades. Watergate's just the tip of the iceberg. This is more than just Richard Nixon screwing around with a tape recorder. This is assassinations, this is surveillance of American citizens! Opening mail! God knows what else! We're trying to get it all out in the open so that we can make things change! The American people are animated, and we might not get another opportunity again! And if you can help us, in any way, well, isn't it worth asking you?"

And Pearl stared with wide-eyed incredulity at Peridot, who practically quivered with excitement during this little speech. She was no flak or bureaucrat or hapless kid just doing her job - she was a true believer. She really thought she could make a difference working through the System.

"You're so young," Pearl whispered, shaking her head.

"Excuse me?" Peridot said, an edge coming into her voice.

"I'm just saying...you're in your twenties, right? No wonder you're so idealistic." A sardonic, mocking chuckle. "You actually believe government can work."

To her surprise, Peridot dropped her amiable attitude and grew angry. Furious, even. Pearl saw her face flush red.

"Please do not patronize me," she growled.

"What do you mean?" Pearl asked.

"Don't think because I'm young I'm stupid or don't know how things work," Peridot said, her voice building up steam as she talked. "God, I am so sick of people treating me like I'm a literal child!"

"Well, you are young, and you're talking to someone who's actually worked in government for more than a few months," Pearl interjected.

"All the clods in the world say the same thing," Peridot continued, ignoring her. "Whether it's because I'm a woman, or because I'm short, or because I'm an Arab, or a liberal, or because I'm young. Well, I can't help being any of those things! I am Peridot Khoury, not whoever or whatever you think I should be."

Pearl felt perversely satisfied that she'd touched a sore spot on her adversary. She took a triumphant drink of water, allowing Peridot to simmer in her anger for a deliciously long moment.
"Sorry," she finally offered with a smirk. "Didn't mean to get you riled up."

And Peridot sank back in her seat, exhausted from her little outburst.

"It's just...I'm tired of people not taking me seriously," Peridot confided, fuming and putting her head in her hands. "If it's not one thing, it's another. And it's not like I can control any of things. I mean, I can't magically age fifteen years so that I'm sufficiently adult. And I'm not interested in a sex change operation or anything like that.

Then she looked up and gave Pearl a plaintive, disappointed look. And for the first time, Pearl felt empathy for her.

"I guess I would have hoped...maybe, knowing your history, you would have understood."

Pearl felt more sympathetic to her now. And a little angry at herself. She knew full well what it was like to have men, and others, dismiss you because of your gender, let alone anything else that marked you as different.

"They're making you work your butt off, huh?" Pearl offered.

"Yeah, and it's really frustrating," Peridot grumbled. "The Senator gives all the really good and valuable assignments to her "senior" aide, Stan Bayard. Ha! Of course, Stan is the nephew of the biggest businessman in Delmarva and one of Senator Dewey's biggest contributors. And, of course, he's a man, so he gets to sit in on hearings and interview the important witnesses while I'm stuck with..."

And she didn't continue, fearing that she'd caused offense. Instead, Pearl chuckled.

"Well, I suppose I'm not Bill Colby," she admitted. She grew more relaxed and even leaned forward towards Peridot, looking at her acquaintance's curious face, young but weary, eager yet frustrated. And for some reason, she came back to a small comment from a moment before.

"You're an Arab?"

"Half-Arab," Peridot clarified. "My father's Lebanese and my mom's...not."

"Never would have guessed."

"My dad always said that I got his complexion and eyes, and my mom's hair and stature. He has no clue where my voice came from, though..."

Pearl chuckled. She found herself warming to the weird little blonde despite herself.

"Peridot, I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression," she said, forcing herself to apologize. "There's nothing...wrong with being young and idealistic or trying to change things. I'm just putting you on notice that it's not going to be easy."

"It's not going to be easy if witnesses like you don't cooperate," Peridot respond.

"That's hardly fair," Pearl responded.

"Isn't it? We need something to go on if we're going to make change," Peridot insisted. "Somebody with real answers to important questions. You can't just assume failure and go from there. That's no way to start change. You have to actually try to accomplish anything."

"My word," Pearl said, impressed by her passion. "I'm just cautioning you that the System...doesn't
always work the way you think it should. Sometimes..." And she realized she was an unguarded moment away from blurting out much more than she should.

She isn't your friend, Pearl reminded herself. Friends don't work for Congress. Friends don't try and blackmail you.

Yet she saw Peridot's face growing expectant and eager, and felt she needed to give her something, even if it was just vague, general advice.

"...Sometimes you need to work outside the System," she concluded.

Peridot wrinkled her nose in disgust. "What does that mean? Weatherman stuff? Blowing up bombs, shooting cops in the street? Is that what you have in mind?"

"Of course not," Pearl protested. There was still enough of the Bureau in her to resent being tied in with...them. (Though Garnet probably wouldn't mind the comparison, and Amethyst wouldn't care either way.)

"Look where that got those clods," Peridot said. "Blowing up toilets in the Pentagon and attacking ROTC buildings. Got them a lot of headlines and nothing else."

"I completely agree," she said patiently.

"Stuff like that is counterproductive, even in a theoretical sense."

"Violence begets violence," Pearl said, nodding. "It's an endless cycle and it doesn't benefit anyone."

"No, it only benefits the people you're trying to take down," Peridot said. "Because it gives them an excuse to smash you with all the might at their disposal. And every means, legal or illegal. Precisely what we're trying to stop."

Pearl leaned back and smiled, impressed. Maybe her little blonde friend wasn't as naive as she'd thought.

"Ms. Khoury...Peridot," Pearl began. Her voice was notably lighter and friendlier than it had been all day.

"Please, if you're gonna address me by my first name...call me Perry. Everyone else does." She smirked. "Even people who hate my guys."

Pearl nodded. "Okay...Perry. You've given me a lot to think about today. Can I have some time to think it over?"

"Sure," Peridot said, sitting up like a dog offered a treat.

"I won't give you a definite yes, but...I'll definitely consider what you said."

And she thought about it. She still thought going outside the System to beat the System was the best overall plan. But...was there really any harm in trying?

She didn't think Garnet or Amethyst would be on board with her idea. Definitely not Garnet, who viewed government as inherently corrupt and evil.

But, she reminded herself, she had to make her own decisions. Even if she was part of a group. And if they could go on missions and intelligence gathering exercises without her, she could at
least consider something like this.

"Anything you can tell me, I'd appreciate it," Peridot said. She was now beaming. "Anything at all. I really think we should be on the same side here. There's so much good we can do together."

"I hope we can be," Pearl agreed. Then she added mysteriously, "One way or the other."

Peridot stood up and graciously leaned across the table, shaking Pearl's hand.

"Anyway, you have my phone number, so...please give me a call when you make up your mind. No rush, but...well, things are moving fast."

"Will you be busy this week?"

"Oh, I'm sure!" Peridot said. "They're getting ready for Tom Charles Huston this week. Big Nixon fish, set up some illegal intelligence program through the White House years before the Plumbers were a thing. Guess if you fear the audience is losing interest you can trawl another Nixon staffer and remind everyone about Watergate."

"Maybe," Pearl said. "Or your Mr. Church could wave another poison dart gun before the camera."

"Oh, we've got more exciting things than that!" Peridot said. "Just you wait!" Then she sighed. "Of course, I'll be getting the small fish...as usual. Some mobster I've never heard of, and we can't get a hold of, and someone who's..."

Then she paused, as if struck by a thought.

"Perry?"

"Pearl, do you know anything about COINTELPRO?"

Pearl set her jaw to avoid gasping. Of course she did. More even than most people who read the newspaper.

"This doesn't strike me as a conversation we should have in public," Pearl said cautiously.

"That's fair," Peridot responded. "It's just...one of our upcoming witnesses is a girl who was, ah, intimately involved in that program. We're having a hard time tracking her down, too. Now, this one clod is a gangster, so I'm not shocked he could, but this lady would probably still be in her twenties. Unless she went underground, and I really doubt..."

"What's her name?" Pearl interrupted, curious.

"Lapis Lazuli," she said, pronouncing the last name Lah-ZOO-lee. "Huh, another gem. Seems like we're all magnetically drawn to each other."

Pearl scanned her thoughts, trying to recall if she'd come across that name in her files or correspondence all those years ago.

"Doesn't ring a bell," she said truthfully. Though now she worried if she should.

"Anyway...give me a call when you make up your mind," Peridot repeated, plopping some cash on the table. "Sooner the better, but I'm not gonna pressure you. Even if you don't...thanks for seeing me, Pearl. Getting to know you a little has been...interesting."

"Likewise," Pearl said, smiling as the aide exited. And her mind swum with fear and hope and
confusion about what she should do next. And if this Lazuli girl was someone she should know.

Somehow, it seemed like she should.

Across the street, as Peridot left the restaurant, someone snapped pictures.
Thanks as always to everyone reading and giving kudos. And, of course, to Master of the Boot for your excellent reviews! Here's another Lapis chapter, with all the angst that entails. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September 21, 1975

Bensalem, PA

Lapis still occasionally went to Mass on Sunday - more from old habit than any firm belief in God - but that week, it was too rainy in the morning for her to bother. She woke up, saw lightning streaking across the sky, groaned and fell back into bed.

*If God hasn't condemned me for my life up to now, she thought bitterly, He won't for missing church this week.*

She slept until noon, by which time the weather cleared up a bit - just enough for a small rainbow to form in the sky. Lapis threw on some clothes and ran a few errands, then went back to her apartment. She fell asleep again, woke up around 3:30 pm, then felt strangely energized. But couldn't think of what to do on a Sunday.

The movies? No, she didn't want to see *Jaws* again. Catch up with friends? The two girls she got along with best at the diner, Holly and Marie, were working that day. Library? Closed. Shopping in Reading? Too far. And her television was broken, so she couldn't even fall back on that.

She looked at the dresser for something to read. A well-worn copy of Stephen King's *Carrie* which she'd already read six or seven times. (An outcast, sexually repressed girl discovering powers and seeking revenge on her tormentors appealed to Lapis, for reasons it didn't take Freud to figure out.) A doorstop Herman Wouk novel she'd been pecking away at over the past six months. An even bigger, and more boring Leon Uris book loaned to her by an acquaintance.

Lapis sighed and collapsed back on her bed. But she was too wired to sleep.

*What a useless, wasted life.*

She wished she still had a paint set. Wondered if the shop in town was still open. She wasn't an especially *good* artist, but she'd always enjoyed painting flowers and landscapes in school. If nothing else, it was a way for her to let off steam and imagine doing something better with her life. Imagine that she possessed talent rather than doubt and misery.

But she hadn't painted in years, not really. Maybe another Sunday, when she thinks to plan ahead, she can change that.

Then her other hobby came to mind, and she smiled. She still liked to swim. But she thought, since it was still warm and sticky out, that others might have the same idea. So she'd wait until later. She
tried to remember how late the pool was open on Sundays - 6 pm? Maybe a little later?

Until then, she’d try to read another few pages of Leon Uris before blocky, turgid prose and regrettable racial stereotypes overwhelmed her. She gave it about ten minutes.

She groaned at the prospect, and thought of happier times.

"A bit cold to be swimming, don't you think?" Lapis teased her friend. She opted to stand on the shoreline, painting the pond rather than swimming in it.

"Not for me!" Catherine laughed.

Lapis took a break to admire her friend, beautifully lithe and enchanting in a two-piece black swimsuit. She glided backwards through the water with confident, sensual grace. Lapis had made due with a blue sundress, which still seemed way too revealing for this weather.

It was deep autumn now; all the trees were bare, the leaves dead and colorful on the ground. They'd found a secluded pond a couple miles away from campus where they liked to swim and hang out.

Lapis tried to concentrate on her painting, but all she could think about was her friend.

They hadn't seen much of Anna in the months since the party. She'd apparently gone home that night with Marvin Miller, the very well-connected loser she'd been mocking. Since then, apparently, she'd decided she was too good for Catherine, who was just another wallflower to her. Definitely too good for Lapis, the snappy new girl.

Which was fine with Lapis - she hadn't liked Anna much in their brief interactions, anyway. And it gave her more time alone with Catherine, who seemed to grow more open with her the more she was.

Catherine's background wasn't dissimilar from hers. Her parents were working class Ohioans, though they weren't Catholic. She'd never fit in school, never had a boyfriend, or many friends of any kind, never known what she was going to do, and only now seemed to be floundering towards a vague future studying English literature.

Naturally, she talked incessantly about books. Modern fiction and classics alike. Kerouac was her Bible, she said, "or maybe Sylvia Plath on my moodier days. Patricia Highsmith's Ripley novels are really great, too. Of course, being a girl I always had a soft spot for Jane Austen."

"I liked Sense and Sensibility," Lapis offered, remembering the one book from high school she hadn't absolutely hated. But she couldn't really keep up. Mostly, she was fascinated hearing her friend talk about things that she, Lapis, had only the smallest experience with. And envied her. And loved her.

"How could someone as pretty as you never have a boyfriend?" Lapis asked her one day.

"I should ask you the same thing," Catherine giggled in response. And Lapis blushed a deep, embarrassing red.

At first, this all seemed like playful banter. Or that's what Lapis tried to tell herself. She kept her strange mixture of feelings squeezed down in her stomach, flaring to cause pain and worry any time she thought about her red hair and trilling laugh.

She had never loved anyone in her life. Not a boy. Definitely not a girl. And she had no idea what she was supposed to be doing.
She had a dim idea that it was wrong, though she didn't quite know why. She'd always been taught boys liked girls, and vice versa. Her parents, devout Catholics they were, had never even raised the possibility of anything else. Maybe the utter strangeness of the situation weighed itself on her.

The more they spent time together, though, the more intense Lapis's feelings grew. And the more obvious that Catherine felt the same way.

Now Lapis dabbed some brown and red blotches of paint on the portrait to represent the carpet of leaves. She scrunched her face in concentration, forcing herself to see the flaws in the work.

The pond needed another layer of blue, perhaps a few more shades for variety. Maybe some white or yellow dappled on it for the Sun. The trees looked like headless stick figures. The late afternoon sky resembled vomit.

She convinced herself the painting was dreadful, scanning it for ways to salvage it, if they existed. And she grew even more horrified when she realized Catherine was standing next to her.

"Yaah!" Lapis shouted, cringing and backing away from her friend, still dripping wet, her red hair a mess.

"Not bad, Lazuli," she said, examining the painting with exaggerated concentration. "Your colors could be better, but that's what revisions are for. Though you've obviously missed the most important part of the painting."

"Oh?"

Catherine made a mischievous smile, staring for a long moment. Then she whispered, as if confiding a dread secret:

"Us."

Then, with a cry she tackled Lapis and pulled her, squealing, into the pond.

"You jerk!" Lapis shouted, splashing her with mock rage, her dress billowing around her in the pond. Though really, she felt positively euphoric.

Catherine responded with laughter and the two splashed each other for a long moment. Then they pulled close, putting their heads together, touching each others' soaking hair.

"I was wrong," Lapis admitted.

"What's that?" Catherine said.

"It's not that cold in here," Lapis said.

There was a slight chuckle as the two drew even closer, staring at each other's eyes for an endless moment.

Lapis didn't even realize what had happened until after their lips parted. And when it dawned her, she felt an excitement rush through her body that she couldn't control. That made her feel truly alive.

Until they heard a rustling in the bushes. Lapis gasped, turned her head, and saw a husky boy peeping from beside the pond.

"Jim, what the fuck are you doing?" Catherine shouted. Lapis stared dumbly, treading water, scared out of her wits.
“What are you ladies up to?” Jim said, goggle-eyed. "Sorry to interrupt your, erm, special moment together."

"I'm going to tear off your dick and strangle you with it," Catherine shouted, pushing away from Lapis, who recoiled at her vulgarity.

"I'd like to see you try," Jim laughed. "I don't think you'd know what to do with a dick even if you had one, based on what I'm seeing."

"And the only pussy you've ever seen is your mom's," Catherine taunted back.

Lapis sunk down into the water in embarrassment. The bad language was enough to make her mortified. But it dawned her now that Jim Crawford.

"Well, have fun with your weird little school girl," Jim said. Then, as an afterthought, he noticed Lapis's painting on the easel and smeared his hand all over the wet paint.

"Jim, you bastard!" Catherine said, rushing towards the shore. Lapis was still too mortified to react to this.

After Jim had gone, she finally made her way to shore. She saw Catherine staring, with a mixture of sadness,

"What a jerk," Catherine said, toweling herself off. "I'm gonna go kill him once I'm properly dressed."

Lapis didn't notice her words, or even the mess he'd made of her painting. All she could say was:

"He saw us."

"Oh, that's Jim Crawford," Catherine said dismissively. "I went to high school with him. He's just a jerk who doesn't know how to mind his own business. Likes to peep at girls however he can. Really gross. And of course, he followed me to college."

"But he saw us." Lapis repeated as a mantra, the terrifying implications of that phrase racing through her mind.

"He's probably gonna go jack off into his sock," Catherine scoffed. "Don't worry about it."

"But what if he-" Lapis started.

And Catherine put her fingers over her lips. And the warmth washed over her again. And both of them smiled.

"Don't worry about it."

And they kissed, again.

Lapis glided aimlessly across the pool, facing up towards the glass roof. Rain started to patter down on it from the late afternoon sky; it was starting to darken. Which was fine for Lapis.

Right now she was thinking mostly about. Another long week at work lay ahead, another six days without rest or sleep or much anything but misery. She had to savor this moment as best she could.

After awhile, she started swimming - long, hard breaststrokes. She went across the small pool in just
a few strokes, then did it again. And again. Working out her frustration. Putting her all into the water.

The splashes echoed loudly in the empty pool, along with her heavy breathing. Sounds she found both eerie and strangely comforting.

After wearing herself out, she floated back on her back and treaded water, gasping for air until she regained control of her lungs.

"Hey Larissa, we're closing in about ten minutes."

It took Lapis a moment to recognize her alias. Then she righted herself and looked over to Charlie, the wrinkled old custodian who was starting to clean up splashes and discarded towels from around the pool.

"Thanks, Charlie," she said.

"'Course, if you want to stay a little longer to freshen up, that's fine by me," he said with a wink.

"Appreciate it," Lapis said with a smile. He waved and stepped out of the room.

So Lapis continued treading water. Kept looking at the ceiling as the light outside slowly faded to dark blue, until light in the pool faded to a sickly yellow-orange...

Then, after several minutes of blissful silence, she heard it.

A heavy squeaking noise, from somewhere in the poolhouse. Then another.

She couldn't think what it might be. At first, didn't care. Until it persisted. And grew louder.

It sounded like shoes scuffing against paneling.

"Charlie, is that you?" she said quietly, righting herself and drifting towards the edge of the pool.

The lights went off, and Lapis gasped. There were only a few small reserve lights, creating a dim, eerie glow around the edge of the water.

Lapis clung to the edge, not sure whether she should stay in the water or get out.

The squeaking sound grew closer. Heavier.

Lapis ducked her head under the pool, as if she could hide there. Waited until she heard the squeaks growing closer.

She heard a gruff cough, then a scratching noise. A sharp, metallic click.

Slowly, Lapis pushed herself to the front of the shallow end of the pool, leaving the tiniest possible wake behind her.

Still she heard the heavy thud of shoes, no longer squeaking but pounding.

Slowly, she peered over the edge of the pool, and saw someone's shadow illuminated against the far wall.

Huge, looming, dangerous.

Her throat and chest tightened in terror. She felt her heartbeat pounding into the water. Fearing that it
would give her way.

Another footstep. She daren't look up now.

Instinct took over, and she began to mutter under her breath...

*Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name...*

Another squeak, then another pounding noise.

*Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven...

As she finished that line, the lights flashed on again. And Lapis screamed.

"Larissa, are you all right?"

Charlie's familiar voice came across the way. She heard him running to her aid.

She raised herself out of the water and looked up at Charlie, breathing heavily. The custodian, bewildered, helped her out of the pool and wrapped a towel around her.

"Larissa, child, what happened?" the custodian said. "I was starting to lock up then I heard you scream. You all right? Fall asleep in the pool or something?"

"There...there was someone here," Lapis stammered, shivering.

"Who?" Charlie asked.

"I dunno," she said. "He turned out the lights and he started to come in and...and then you..."

And she couldn't finish the sentence. She broke down crying. Charlie let her sob into his shoulder for a moment, bewildered, then sat her down on the bench beside the pool.

"Now, I've been here the whole time and didn't see or hear anyone," he said gently. "Might have heard me making some noise while I worked. But if it'll help, I'll take a look around."

"Okay," Lapis said, nodding vacantly.

"Now, you sit around the pool and I'll take a look," Charlie said with a fatherly smile. "If you're still feeling spooked, I can call you a cab or something. Plus, I think there's a bus that comes by in a little bit..."

"No, that's okay," Lapis said, waving him off. She appreciated the offer, but she also didn't want him to be too helpful. Mostly, she was feeling confused and embarrassed.

Charlie shrugged. "Suit yourself, ma'am. Now, I'll start locking up and let you out once you shower and dress. Sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I think so," Lapis insisted. And the custodian walked off, shaking his head.

*Maybe I'm getting paranoid,* Lapis thought to herself. *Probably just heard or saw Charlie working and got spooked. That's what happens when you spend your whole life running and hiding.*

Though, try as she might, she couldn't convince herself of that.

The rain had stopped by the time Lapis emerged from the pool house. The last glimmers of twilight
were vanishing beneath the horizon; the streetlights had flickered on.

It was just a few blocks to her apartment. And though still a little rattled, Lapis convinced herself that whatever had happened in the pool was just her imagination.

She made it about two blocks, walking past the grocery store and a gas station when she heard the noise again.

The squeaking.

She gasped and turned around, searching frantically for someone - something - that might have produced it.

She saw nothing. Just the flickering streetlights, some leaves and garbage blowing through the streets. The lights of a car somewhere across town.

She stopped, took a deep breath, and kept moving. Walking past a newspaper store, a house, a pizza restaurant with its neon OPEN sign still glowing.

All the time, her mind spinning with terror and confusion and doubt. Trying to convince herself that she was being foolish. That she wasn't being followed. That she was alone.

After another block or so, she heard the squeak again. Instantly turned on her heels. And watched someone duck into the shadows. Didn't see who - just a silhouette.

She half thought it was a hallucination. Until she heard another cough.

And watched him light a cigarette, as if mocking her. As if he wanted to be seen. As if this was all some kind of sadistic game.

She tried to scream or cry for help, to challenge her pursuer. But her throat cramped shut.

Staring for a long moment until the cigarette went out, the light replaced with a dimly visible billow of tobacco smoke. Then, trembling, she continued down the sidewalk.

Just a few more blocks.

After about ten or twelve steps, she heard the squeak again. Heard the footsteps behind her. Another cough.

She quickened her pace. Jogging now.

The heavy footsteps behind her, still slow, still deliberate, yet somehow keeping pace.

Past a deli and a flower shop. Beneath a streetlamp that flickered on and off.

She heard a loud noise rushing up behind her. And braced for impact. Feared that she was about to be assaulted or shot or stabbed or. That her whole past was catching up with her in one grim, horrible moment.

Then a loud shriek, right in her ears. And she jumped. Turned. And saw it was...

A bus?

Yes. A bus had creaked to a stop beside her. And about a dozen passengers got off, mostly older couples returning home from Sunday dinner.
Lapis let out a heavy sigh, watching the people intermingle and chat and go their separate ways. She spotted a tall man in a gray coat who stood amidst the crowd, but didn't seem to be part of it. He stood there, oblivious to the commotion, for a long moment, not acknowledging Lapis's presence.

Then, mercifully, he turned and melted away, walking down the street past an elderly couple deep in conversation.

Lapis breathed another sigh of relief. She turned, watching the bus go past, then made sure that the man still wasn't following her.

Nothing. No one. Just light and shadows.

At least she knew she wasn't just being paranoid now. And at least she was just across the street from her apartment building.

She walked as steadily as she could, splashing through a puddle. Reached the doorstep, fumbling for her keys.

She looked over her shoulder at the sky. Watched the clouds roll by, revealing a half-moon.

And her eyes caught a glint of light on the building opposite her.

Lapis's eyes shifted down, and her blood ran cold. Because she spotted him.

A man. Another silhouette.

Watching her.

Through binoculars.

Crying out in terror, she rammed the apartment door open and rushed inside, slamming shut as hard as she could, running through the lobby and upstairs as quick as her legs could carry her.

Across the street, the man lowered his binoculars, lit a cigarette, and faded into the shadows.

Her first instinct, as she rushed inside and locked the door behind her, was to cry. To weep. To give into despair and self-loathing, as she always did. To quit.

They've found me. It's been two years, and they've finally tracked me down. Even here, in this worthless bedroom town. And now all my sins will be revenged upon me.

And she did vomit, messily, into a trashcan. As if purging her fears and resentments in the most literal fashion.

Her second thought was to compose herself, physically mentally, to think defiance. To force herself to accept that this time, it would be different.

So what if they'd found her? Isn't that what she'd been waiting for all these years? It was just a question of when, where and how.

And this time, Lapis resolved, she wasn't going to run.

Might as well face a reckoning now. And if they won't leave me alone, she thought, rummaging through her dresser drawer, I'll make them leave me alone.
She threw aside a phone book, some open letters and mail, a notepad and some receipts. Making a mess, and no longer giving a shit.

Finally, she reached the bottom of the drawer and pulled out a .25 caliber pistol. It wasn't much, but it could still kill someone in a pinch.

No longer trembling, her arms now steadied with resolve and steeled with purpose, Lapis rammed a clip into the magazine.

Outside, it started raining again.

Chapter End Notes

I'll admit that the scenes with young Lapis discovering her sexuality owe a lot to Jeffrey Eugenides' novel Middlesex, one of my favorite books ever. And, for those who didn't pick up on it, the rest of the chapter is an extended homage to Val Lewton's horror flicks, especially Cat People and The Leopard Man.
Chapter Notes

Shorter chapter than usual, mostly to get two key plot points out of the way. May or may not have a new chapter tomorrow; will then take the rest of the week off for other projects. Thanks as always for reading!

September 23, 1975

Washington, DC

"Perry, don't let's go over this again."

"Stan, please, I know the Senator's attending the hearings today..."

"You're already on thin ice for missing so many days last week."

"I told you that was important investigative staff work..."

"Jesus, Peridot, you're not a spy or a reporter, you're a staffer. And one, I might remind you, who's on very thin ice right now."

"Please! All you and the Senator let me do is answer and make phone calls..."

"That's a huge part of working for a Senator."

"But it's not what you do!"

"I have seniority."

"We have pages who can do that stuff!"

"Not very well, apparently. Now, if you'll excuse me, Perry..."

And with that exchange, Peridot rushed back to her desk and groaned into her desk. She wondered how much longer she could stay in this job without losing her mind.

Part of her couldn't wait to get home and check her messages, to see if Pearl had decided to follow up and go forward with testifying or at least privately telling her story. It would yield a lot more dividends than...

She picked up a note left on her desk. It read:

"Peridot -

"Anna Glass of Ocean Town is one of our biggest contributors. It is her 72nd birthday! Please call her at..."

Peridot didn't bother reading the rest of the message. She put her head down and sighed again.
As if on cue, her telephone rang.

"Senator Dewey's office, Peridot speaking," she said in a defeated voice.

"This is Lapis Lazuli," a now-familiar voice came across the line.

Peridot instantly bolted upright in her seat.

"Ms. Lazuli," she said, still stumbling over the pronunciation. "What an unexpected..."

"Listen, they're watching me and I'm pretty sure they're listening to me, too. I'm calling you from a pay phone in Chester."

"Hold on, hold on," Peridot said, standing up and grabbing a pencil. "Who is watching you, exactly?"

"I don't know exactly," Lapis said. "But I can guess. I got mixed up in some...really mixed up things, as you probably know, and...I don't think we should talk over the phone. Can't be sure that you aren't bugged, either."

Peridot hadn't thought about that, and felt a pang of fear. Which she brushed off. Who would be crazy enough to tap a congressman's phone?

"Is there anywhere we can meet?" Lapis continued.

"Umm, sure," Peridot said, deciding to hell with Senator Dewey and Stan and the other clods keeping her down.

"You're up in...Chester is Pennsylvania, right?"

"I'm headed south," Lapis said. "We'll need to meet somewhere near DC. Somewhere you can protect me. Or at least...help me protect myself."

Finally, her fear and seriousness registered with Peridot.

"Listen, I'll need to call you back..."

"There's no time, and, like, how are you gonna keep in touch anyway? It's not like you know what phones I'm gonna be at on a given day or anything."

Peridot sighed and leaned forward, closing her eyes, rubbing her temples. What could she do?

She wondered, fleetingly, whether to call the police or the FBI. Whether to talk with the Senator to arrange protection with the US Marshals. And somehow, she thought about Pearl. Though really, what could Pearl do to help?

No, it was time to take charge.

"Okay, Ms. Lazuli," she said in her most officious voice. "There is a Hilton in Georgetown you can stay at. Buy a room under my name. Peridot Khoury, P-E-R-I-D-O-T, K-H-O-U-R-Y. Tell them that I work for Senator Dewey and that I will pay for your room. Call my home number when you reach there and I will come meet you as soon as I can. We will talk and figure out what to do from there."

A long pause on the other end. Peridot thought she heard traffic passing by, feared that her contact might have hung up or run away or been waylaid.
"Ms. Lazuli?" she asked.

Finally, a long sigh came.

"Okay," Lapis said.

Then she hung up, leaving Peridot with a thousand questions and a million worries.

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**Garden City, GA**

Mr. SCHWARZ, counsel: "...So that whatever recommendations you made with respect to illegal opening of the mail, or burglary, or surreptitious entry, were ones you believe represented the views of the entire intelligence community with the exceptions of the footnotes of Mr. Hoover himself; is that right?"

Mr. HUSTON, witness: "Yes."

Mr. SCHWARZ: "Now you did recommend, did you not, that the United States should commence, in your view commence, as you understood it, commence or recommence the illegal opening of mail; is that correct?"

Mr. HUSTON: "Yes. My understanding, from my contacts with the Bureau and through the working committee, was that in the past, this had been a technique that been employed, particularly on matters relating to espionage..."

Rick Capuano grunted with frustration, watching the hearings unspool on his television. He didn't know who annoyed him more; the young counsel, Fritz Schwarz, with his shaggy bowl cut comb-over and self-righteousness, or Tom Charles Huston, the quiet, quavering Nixon aide in the thick glasses and the ill-fitting suit.

_They're all the same jackasses_, he muttered to himself, sauteing some sausage in a pan on his stove. _Nothing's changed. And this is all penny ante bullshit, anyway. Who cares about opening mail?_

Mr. SCHWARZ: "...You also advocated that the United States should commence, or recommence, to commit burglaries, to acquire valuable intelligence information; is that correct?"

Mr. HUSTON: "Yes. I was told that the Bureau had undertaken black bag jobs for a number of years - up to 1966. That it had been successful and valuable...And they felt that this was something, again given the revolutionary climate, they thought they needed to have the authority to do."

_Imagine what these bastards would do with all the secrets *I* could tell them_, Capuano thought, pouring the sausage onto a plate with pasta. _Little Schwarz would shit himself with terror. And Senator Church, that parboiled blowhard, would probably get down on his knees and cry._

Of course, Capuano had made it virtually impossible for them to ask about those secrets. The moment he received a phone call from one of Church's congressional staff, he packed his bags and hightailed to Georgia, leaving his phone disconnected, his mail slot filled with notices and subpoenas that he never intended to answer. Not that Garden City, a suburb right outside Savannah, was especially off the map, but it was as good a place to hide as any until the heat died down.

He was just about to sit down and eat when he received a knock on the door. He hesitated a moment, then grabbed a handgun off the table - he had about a dozen or so strewn about, paranoid as he was. He looked through the peephole and saw a familiar face through the door. He smiled warily, then...
"Didn't expect to see you here," Capuano groaned.

"It wasn't easy finding you," Jasper said. And Capuano, reassured by the sight of an old acquaintance, let her in.

"These damn congress creeps are sticking their noses into everything! They've got this poor schmuck on television spilling his guts out about every little thing Tricky Dicky asked him to do. Surprised he doesn't have Nixon's brand of toilet paper memorized for him. Might have wiped his ass once or twice in the White House.

"Nobody's gonna care about this in a few weeks," Jasper assured him. "Everything's gonna blow over."

"Sure, but until then I've gotta careful," Capuano said, putting his gun down and sitting in front of his plate. He offered Jasper a seat, but she declined, instead drifting over to the kitchen sink.

Mr. HUSTON: "...Senator, I really was peripherally concerned with antiwar demonstrations. What I was concerned about was the 40,00 bombings that took place in one year. What I was concerned about was the 39 police officers were killed in sniping incidents..."

"Couldn't you have found a better place to hide than this rat hole?" she asked, running a finger along the filthy counter top.

"Nobody's gonna look for you in a rat hole," Capuano laughed. "First thing I figured. If I was living the high life in some casino, they'd have the Marshals and the FBI on me before you could switch the dial on the TV."

"Fair enough," Jasper said, positioning herself directly behind the mobster as he ate.

"You want anything?" Capuano asked. "Think I burned this sausage...and these noodles are fucking watery. Never learned to cook. My one flaw."

"You're telling me you made shit and you ask me to eat it?" Jasper asked.

"Fair enough," Capuano said.

Jasper stood there silently for a moment, watching her friend eat, the sound of his sloppy chewing drowning out the television. Her thoughts turned in her head as she pondered her mission.

Sen. CHURCH, Chairman: "...You were asking the President to take action that violated the Federal statute, upon the theory that he had some inherent right to do this. Now since that is such a central question, since it does go to the protection offered American citizens in the fourth amendment to the Constitution, did you take the matter up with the Attorney General of the United States to secure his opinion..."

"How are things in Chicago?" Jasper asked.

"Since Momo got hit this summer, not so good," Capuano said through a mouthful of pasta. "Rosselli's running scared, coz they don't know who did it. Could have been the Commission, could have been...well, our friends."

"That's what I was thinking," Jasper said guiltily, hanging back. "Giancana knew a lot."
"Uh-huh," Capuano said. "Stuff that would make these sniveling cretins' ass hairs stand on end."

"Course, you know a lot too," Jasper said. The room instantly went silent, aside from the murmur of indignant senators on television.

"And so do I," Jasper said after a long, deadly moment. Capuano breathed again at that, and he turned back to his food.

"Some people on the committee are thinking that we killed Kennedy," Jasper said. "Want to hold hearings about it."

"I wish," Capuano grunted.

"We all know you guys wouldn't have the balls to do a thing like that," Jasper snapped.

"And you wouldn't have the brains," Capuano goaded. They both shared a rueful laugh, colleagues teasing each other, long-ago crimes and conspiracies becoming a private joke.

"You know," Capuano said, putting down his plate. "When I first met you - Christ, that was almost 15 years ago - I'll have to admit. I thought, this is a woman getting involved in the rough stuff. What is wrong with this world? She should stay home with her daddy or gimme head in a nightclub. No offense, you understand. But then I saw you take out those fucking beaners in Miami with your bare hands! Never seen a thing like that before in my life."

Jasper smiled wistfully. "Taught you a valuable lesson that night, huh?"

"Then I thought, you must be some kinda she-male or something. Again, no offense - I'm just relating what I thought back then, you know? But no, you're all lady and tough as nails. The meanest broad I ever met. And the sweetest."

"Yeah," Jasper said, moving closer to him, placing a hand on his shoulder, then moving away.

"Yeah," Capuano said again, taking a sip of some cheap dollar-store wine. "Of course, we coulda done a better job getting rid of Fidel, but...well, we can't say we didn't try."

"Not at all," Jasper agreed, pacing across the kitchen anxiously. "Not at all."

"Now you tell me, is the world a better place because we did what we did? Maybe, maybe not. But it's certainly a worse place because we failed. Think of all the beaners down south dying in concentration camps and firing squads and all the fucking mischief that monkey Castro's been getting up to. The Cubans are gonna turn this entire hemisphere red if they stay in business any longer."

"We have friends working on that," Jasper said.

"Getting back in the Castro game, huh?" Capuano said. "Jesus, this wine is foul."

"No, but there are other things...Of course, we hit a bit of a snag."

Jasper took a deep, heavy breath, staring at the floor for a long moment. She whispered a prayer under her breath.

"What's that?" Capuano said.

Jasper balled her fists for a moment, steeling herself. Then she moved across the kitchen, back behind her old acquaintance.
"Two of my operatives got thrown in hospital by some punks in DC," she said. "And a third one's in a bad coma. Might not make it."

"Pity. But if this business has taught me anything, there's no shortage of people who will, erm, do that kind of work for the right price."

She was now so close she heard his breath.

"Yeah," she whispered. A long pause, looking skyward with regret and hesitation. Then down at Capuano's head again.

"Of course, there's another snag," she said. "Project DIAMOND."

"I've heard rumors about that."

"Our friends want us to clean up some messes. Ordinarily they might not care, but with Congress going all moralistic..."

"Don't blame you. Besides, some messes deserve to be cleaned up."

She struck him hard on the back of the neck. His head crashed forward so hard it cracked his dinner plate.

Jasper stood for a moment, staring at his eyes staring in shock and terror across the table. At the wine pouring from his hand onto the floor. At her friend and partner and former lover, now just another name to cross off her list.

After another moment, she sighed and stalked out of the apartment, locking the door behind her.
Trust

September 24, 1975

Washington, DC

Pearl spent several days agonizing over her decision. Ever since lunch on Saturday, she'd carried a scrap of paper with Peridot's phone numbers on it, debating whether to call. Every time she worked up the nerve to pick up a telephone, she was interrupted, or distracted, or felt a last minute twinge of fear or guilt that prevented her from dialing.

She wasn't entirely sure it was the right thing to do. That was true. But mostly she felt bad about not consulting Garnet and Amethyst. It felt like a betrayal not to bring them on board with something so important. Especially when she figured - she knew - that they were so opposed to her doing anything publicly. But at this point, she was willing to at least consider going behind her back.

She still didn't fully trust Peridot, not really. She seemed curiously naive in her faith in government, something Pearl had mostly shed a long time ago. But she was at least sincere and honest, and wanted to do the right thing. And Pearl couldn't help admiring that about her. There was no reason to disabuse Peridot of anything so long as she tried to do good work. Besides, a smart girl like her should learn those lessons on her own.

And, she thought, maybe part of her did want to keep it a secret. It had been a long time since she'd kept a secret from Garnet and Amethyst. And, she reasoned, they kept plenty of things from her. Whatever their excuses - security or deniability - it galled her that her closest friends and partners, people whom she would trust with her life, still didn't trust her enough to tell her everything she would need to know.

If she couldn't trust them, and they couldn't trust her...then who?

With these thoughts clanking around her mind, Pearl went about her daily business on Tuesday, finishing her transcriptions and dropping them off at a post office. Buying a few small groceries and depositing the electric bill (because of course Garnet and Amethyst wouldn't take care of it). She treated herself to lunch at a small diner, nibbling furtively as she skimmed through Gore Vidal's Burr.

Vidal usually irritated her, but she did enjoy this book for deflating the American myths she had once sincerely believed. For showing America's Founders to have been a flawed, egotistical mass of very ordinary men more interested with their place in history than doing actual good. And she laughed out loud upon discovering this bon mot:

"The public is always relieved to find that once the chief officers of state are elected they do not sincerely want change."

She could guess what Mr. Vidal thought about Senator Church and his friends!

Thus the words of a professional cynic, and ingrained bitterness and indecision, and the leaden logeyness of an overcooked roast beef sandwich, momentarily dialed down Pearl's ardor for truth telling. She put Peridot out of her mind as she went back to her apartment, hoping instead to get some more work done before her partners came home.
And then - maybe then - she would talk to them about it. If she didn't, though...maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, either.

"If there's nothing else I want from our relationship - and there really isn't - it's trust. You have to trust me, and I have to trust you. No secrets, no lies, no keeping anything about yourself from me."

"Well, that's not really feasible when you're dating someone who works for the FBI."

"I'm not going to ask you about national secrets or anything like that, silly. I mean personal things. Things about yourself. I am an open book, and I hope you are, too."

"I'll try."

Pearl remembered this conversation more vividly than anything else she did with Rose Quartz. More than the parties and concerts they attended together, the movies they watched, the lovemaking and laughter and meals and all the million commonplace things you take for granted in a relationship.

She remembered Rose's curious smile, loving yet sad, understanding that Pearl would struggle to keep her promise, but appreciating that she'd make the effort. Rose was so easy to read...at least Pearl thought so. And that's why she loved her.

She also remembered, as they lay in bed together that night, curious details, things she probably saw and experienced a million times but didn't care register, didn't really care about. The murky orange-brown light of the hotel room, the peeling wallpaper, the faint smell of cigarette smoke mixing with the musty blanket, the din of rock music from an adjacent hotel room. The constellation of freckles on Rose's shoulders, the moistness of her hand, the way her bright red hair shone even in the dim light, the love and tenderness in her eyes.

"My Pearl," she muttered with that heavenly voice, stroking Pearl's cheek with her hand. Pearl blushed and felt a surge of warmth, reaching up to grab Rose's arm, staring into her eyes and stroking her wrist. She really wished that she could live up to Rose's expectations of her. That she could be a fraction as warm and wonderful as this woman she'd fallen for.

But she doubted she could. And that fear of failure never failed to cause her pain.

Pearl met Rose around Christmas 1966, at some party a colleague dragged her to. The world had started to change beyond recognition, thanks to Vietnam and Civil Rights and rock music and race riots, but she still clung to her old illusions about the FBI. Even though the past few years had taught her how little real value she had. Most of her colleagues had been fired or quit, unable to take the workload or punished for not meeting The Director and Miss Gandy's impossible standards.

Peggy Royal was only the first, and not even the worst. Just a month or so prior to the party, Louise Schaal followed her. After three years of loyal service to the Bureau, enduring long hours, low pay and a million indignities with grace, humor and unfailing cheerfulness, she made the ultimate mistake: she became pregnant. Once her bosses found out, it was only a matter of moments before they made their decision.

"I don't understand," she'd wailed as she cleaned out her desk. "I've given so much to the Bureau, and they're firing me, why? Why?"

Pearl struggled to comfort her. "Well," she said, "I'm not too surprised. I mean, if you have children, you can't be reasonably expected to do this job..."
"It's not fair," Louise pouted. "I can't help that we want to have kids. I mean, they don't expect us to be human here. Just a bunch of goddamn machines spitting out type."

Pearl didn't know what to say that. She promised Louise that they'd stay in touch, but it was the last time Pearl ever spoke to her.

Besides Pearl, only Eleanor remained of the original group of twelve. And she had turned herself into an emotionless robot, accepting, never thinking of speaking criticism or getting pregnant or having any life outside the Bureau. She was auditioning for Miss Gandy's understudy, Pearl thought, sacrificing her soul for it.

Pearl kept her agonies to herself, always playing prim, proper and cheerful at work, then going home to scream into a pillow. To doodle furiously in a diary that she wrote in every day, then burned because she couldn’t stand to read back her words. To try and distract herself with books and music and television and found it made her feel worse.

Louise was right - she couldn't be human in that job. No one could, but especially not a woman, who had to work twice as hard, endure indignant leers and innuendos and occasionally even physical contact from male colleagues, and the endless, unsympathetic scorn of Miss Gandy, who'd abandoned her womanhood to the job long ago, and expected everyone else to do the same.

Pearl couldn't even remember the name of the girl who brought her to the party. Just another young twenty-something girl who came in just long enough to have her dreams crushed, then drifted on to another job, poisoned for life. But Pearl went, making, as she occasionally did, an effort to be sociable.

It was a restaurant somewhere in Georgetown. Pearl, still wearing her work clothes, was easily the most conservatively dressed person there - women wore sundresses and halter tops, the men wore their shirts open and hair long. Pearl instantly felt out of place and retreated into a corner as her colleague peeled off to join some girls her own age.

She stayed long enough to get a drink or two and to watch the young people dancing as a mediocre house band played Beatles tunes. She wished she could join them. She wanted to fit in. But she couldn't. And she knew she was just dragging the party down by being there.

Just as she prepared to leave, she accidentally bumped into a heavyset woman in a pink dress, knocking her into the wall.

"Oh my, I'm so sorry," Pearl said, flustered. "I didn't mean..."

The woman responded with a warm, open smile that suggested instant, eternal forgiveness. And Pearl's heart sank immediately.

"It's perfectly all right," she said. "We all have our moments."

"Me more than most people," Pearl said, her idea of a joke. Except the woman laughed heartily, startling Pearl, yet also flattering her.

"So, what brings you to Veronica's shindig? You don't seem like the party-going type."

"Oh, I'm here with...a friend," Pearl said, watching her colleague dance with a mustachioed young man on the floor. (What would Miss Gandy say?)

"Hmm," the woman said with quiet sympathy. "Well, I know Veronica going on five years. She's a nice young woman, but she does get really into these parties...they're not for everyone."
Who the hell is Veronica? Pearl thought. She couldn't remember if her coworker had told her, or, for that matter, whether she really cared.

"My preferred night is staying home and reading," Pearl said with a little hauteur.

"That's wonderful," the woman said. "I'm always looking for a mind at work."

Pearl smiled, much more broadly than she intended. Usually other women her age (though was this woman her age? Pearl couldn't tell) found reading dull and a waste of time.

"My name is Pearl," she said, extending a hand. "I suppose bumping into you is not a proper introduction."

The woman laughed and shook it. "No, but it's certainly memorable! Rose, Rose Quartz."

"I should have guessed from..." Pearl gestured to Rose's hair. Rose laughed again, her whole body shaking with delight.

Am I really that funny or is she just being polite? Pearl wondered. My jokes have always been wretched. Or maybe she likes me. Then she decided, there's no way you could fake laughter like that.

"What do you do for a living?" Rose asked.

"I'm a typist for the FBI," Pearl said.

"Oh, that must be fascinating!" Rose said, though her face seemed uncertain.

"Oh no. In fact, it's terribly dull, soul-crushing work." Pearl said it with light inflection which she hoped masked her pain.

"Well, I suppose being a typist isn't the same as actually fighting crime," Rose said.

"Yeah," Pearl said, feeling comfortable enough to vent a little. "Not what I went to law school for. But, it is what it is."

"Well, I'm sure a bright girl like you will find something worthy of your time and talents," Rose said, beaming at her.

"I appreciate that," Pearl said sincerely. She froze, so unpracticed in small talk that she couldn't think of what to say, or ask next.

Fortunately, Rose figured it out. "I work as a seamstress in a fabric store in Rosslyn," she said. " Doesn't pay much, but it allows me to use my skills and, you know, live my life the way I want to. And that's not a small thing."

"That's very neat," Pearl said.

Rose giggled. "Okay, maybe we need to work on your slang a bit."

"Granted," Pearl admitted. "Still, I admire that...I'm a bit jealous that you get to do something you love every day."

"You'll get there some day," Rose promised, as if she had some way to deliver on it. But Pearl appreciated it anyway.
The two stared at each other for a long moment, silent, lost in each others' eyes even as the music played in the background.

"If you're not comfortable here, we could go somewhere else," Rose offered.

"Oh," Pearl said, blushing again. "That's all right. I mean, I wouldn't want to take you away from the party..."

"Veronica holds one of these things every other weekend," Rose scoffed. "She won't mind if I duck out. So, what do you say? Wanna get food or a drink somewhere a little more private?"

Pearl stared again, uncertain about Rose's offer. Until she again noticed the warm, welcoming sincerity in her new acquaintance's eyes. And all of her reticence melted instantly.

"Why not?" she said.

They ended the night in bed together. And Pearl wondered how something so commonplace could make her so happy.

Pearl didn't agonize over their relationship. She'd never thought of herself as gay - she had dated men as recently as the previous year - but loving Rose just seemed natural, right. A perfect fit. While she wasn't about to run out and proclaim her sexuality, still a very dangerous proposition in 1966, neither did she feel any shame or discomfort.

Besides, she compartmentalized so much of her life anyway that hiding a romance, and her sexual orientation, just seemed one more secret among many.

She was who she was. And so was Rose, thank God. But that made it even harder to accept Rose's request to be truthful about her life.

And whatever Rose said, work made that even harder.

They'd been dating about a year when Pearl received a tap on her shoulder from Miss Gandy. She went into the woman's office, fearing that she'd done something wrong - one always assumed that with Miss Gandy - and stood in front of the secretary's desk while she finished a report.

"Pearl, you've been with the Bureau for four years now," the woman said, her voice bright and friendly. (Which always unnerved Pearl - she inevitably hid a dagger in a velvet sheath.) "I must admit that I'm very impressed with your work. You work quickly and accurately - you are more word perfect than any girl I've ever met."

Pearl blushed with surprised satisfaction. "Thank you, ma'am," she said modestly.

"And you have been very discreet in your personal life," Miss Gandy added, "not doing anything outside of work to make us regret hiring you."

Pearl averted her eyes, thinking about Rose. "Of course not, ma'am."

"Very good. Of course, we know that young women like yourselves hope to get married and have children and do womanly things. And that's fine! Totally understandable. But this job demands total, absolute commitment that doesn't always accommodate those desires. We don't mind if you see someone, but we prefer that you don't do anything that might detract from your work or else...reflect badly on the Bureau."
"I understand, ma'am," Pearl said, starting to grow impatient. She felt a pang of bitterness for her departed coworkers, which registered fleetingly on her face. If Miss Gandy noticed, she didn't show it.

"With your mixture of skill and discretion, I'm thinking there are better uses of your talents within the Bureau."

Pearl perked up. This certainly was unexpected.

"In particular, we're looking for someone able to handle extraordinarily sensitive documents for an extraordinarily important program. Matters of national security."

Pearl felt a lump growing at the back of her throat. An incredible mixture of emotions went through her - pride, fear, confusion, angst. Gratitude. And perhaps resentment.

"Can we trust you?" Miss Gandy asked, her voice suddenly hard, fixing Pearl with a challenging stare.

Pearl knew that, whatever she felt, she could only give one answer. Anything else would be a colossal admission of failure.

"Of course, ma'am."

"There was another assassination last night," Sapphire intoned. "Riccardo Caiazzo, alias Ricky Capuano, a member of the Chicago Crime Outfit, murdered in a beach house in Garden City, Georgia. Neck snapped like a carrot. No weapon, no fingerprints or leads, except that a witness claims a woman had visited him shortly before his death."

"So a mob boss was murdered," Amethyst groaned. "Big furry deal. What does that have to do with us?"

"He was on a list of Congressional witnesses, but never appeared before the committee or its staff. He was hiding out. Looks like Project DIAMOND got to him first."

It didn't take a psychic to put two and two together. Garnet and Amethyst exchanged a worried glance.

"Do you know any more about Project DIAMOND then what you've already told us?" Garnet asked.

"Hmm." She sat back and thought, playing at summoning psychic thoughts or spirits or whatever, inevitably making Amethyst shake impatiently while awaiting the answer.

Finally, she answered:

"From what I've learned, Project DIAMOND is precisely what we guessed before. It's a program to silence witnesses with potentially damaging information about FBI and CIA intelligence operations. Especially those being summoned before Congress to testify in public."

"Then why aren't they going after high-profile witnesses?" Garnet asked. "I mean, the Director of the CIA was their very first witness..."

"Because they can count on them to be silent or to give them as little as possible. People like the ones on the list don't know, or don't care about discretion."
"Plus, they're too famous to kill," Amethyst guessed. "Like, if you murder the head of the CIA or some dude who worked for Nixon, people would notice. Kill a mobster or a Chilean exile or an informant, no one will care, or will chalk it up to something less nefarious."

Sapphire nodded. "Precisely."

"But Pearl's whole thing is discretion," Amethyst said. "That's what I don't get. She wouldn't talk even if she wanted to."

"Seems like they don't want to take that chance," Garnet said. Though internally, she wondered about that, wondering how much they could trust Pearl at this point. If there were things she'd kept to herself despite everything.

"What does Pearl know that's so dangerous, anyway?" Amethyst asked Garnet, her braggadocio giving way to fear.

"She did a lot during her days with the FBI," Garnet reminded her. "Had access to privileged documents that spelled out things the rest of us could only guess at."

Amethyst nodded as she and Garnet stood up to leave.

"Thank you, as always, for your hospitality," Garnet said to Sapphire.

Ruby waited impatiently until the twosome exited the room, then listened as they chatted with Bismuth before leaving the store. After another moment, she came forward and groaned to Sapphire.

"What are we doing?" Ruby barked.

"What do you mean?" Sapphire said.

"Are you sure we want to get mixed up with them?" she asked, disgusting dripping from that last word. "Looks like they're onto some heavy stuff."

"It's not a question of want," Sapphire said. "We're already mixed up with them. As to anything else, it's Fate. Beyond my control."

Ruby balled her fists and grimaced, irritated by Sapphire's stoicism.

"I mean, you don't have to tell them anything..." she insisted.

Sapphire shrugged. "If they show up, I might as well. Garnet is an old friend. Besides, just speaking to them lands us in trouble, whether or not I actually say anything. What choice do I have?"

"I hate it when you talk like that," Ruby groaned.

"When don't I talk like that?" Sapphire teased.

The two shared a laugh and a smile. Ruby clutched Sapphire's hand and kissed it gently.

"I'm just worried, is all," Ruby insisted. "You're too young and pretty and amazing to end up a corpse."

Sapphire just laughed. "If that's my Fate, so be it. But I'm thinking the two of us have a long and...interesting life ahead of us."

Ruby forced herself to smile, but she didn't feel too certain of that right now. This all stank to high
heaven, and the last thing she wanted was for Sapphire to get hurt.

"I just wish I could be as sure as you," Ruby admitted, drawing away.

"What will be will be," Sapphire said again, blowing out her candle.

Chapter End Notes

There are a lot of Hamilton references strewn throughout the story, some more obvious than others. See if you can spot ’em!
Of course Lapis didn't follow Peridot's instructions. Why should she expect otherwise?

Instead, Peridot found herself driving to a small hotel in Hagerstown, Maryland, a little bundle of highways and crossroads and shopping centers without much to commend it.

She really was aggravated, and not just because she was missing another day of work. (At this point, she cared less and less about that.) She felt like she was living a really bad spy movie. Why did Lapis have to make everything so difficult for her?

While there was an outside chance Peridot might explain billing her boss for a hotel in Georgetown, how would she explain this? She had to hope Lapis had some dread secrets that could blow open the entire investigation, otherwise Peridot would be angry.

Somewhere along the highway, across from a tacky seafood restaurant with Hawaiian and beach bum decor, she spotted it. A little one-level fleabag motel which, even from the outside, smelled of mothballs and wet paint. An old store or office next to the hotel lay in ruins, its windows and doors blasted out as if by a hurricane, or possibly an explosion.

Peridot went to the side of the hotel, searching out the room number Lapis had given her. A shingle fell off the roof as she walked past, startling her. She heard someone arguing in one of the rooms, a blare of loud music from another, the faint whiff of tobacco smoke. Finally, she reached the number - 416 - and knocked.

After a long moment, the door cracked open. She saw a blue eye staring out at her.

"Are you Peridot?" an unmistakable voice said.

"Yes I am," Peridot said as cheerfully as circumstances allowed.

"Were you followed? Is there anyone with you?"

"Just me," Peridot assured her.

"All right," Lapis responded. The door clattered shut and Peridot stood anxiously, listening to the latch clattering open. Finally the door opened slightly.

"You can come in. Just, don't leave the door open."

Paranoid much? Peridot thought.

Peridot took a step forward, edging through the door and closing it tightly behind her. Then she felt something cold against her neck.

"Spread your arms," Lapis commanded. Peridot obeyed, more nonplussed than scared.

She felt the young woman frisking her and felt a blush of embarrassment and annoyance.

"I don't typically carry a weapon," Peridot said angrily. "I'm a congressional aide, not a spy..."
"How do I know that?" Lapis said. "We've only ever talked on the phone, and that's not exactly the best proof of trust..."

"Whoa, whoa, calm down!" Peridot said, tearing herself away from Lapis. She saw the harried young woman aim a small pistol at her chest, and raised her hands in the air.

"Lapis, right?" Peridot said, swallowing her fear, staring into the woman's intense, angry blue eyes. "Lapis Lazuli? Listen, I'm just here to find out what you know. Nothing more, nothing less. No guns, no tape recorders, nothing that's gonna give you away or spill your secrets."

Lapis lowered the gun and relaxed her shoulders, just a bit. But her eyes retained their challenging glare.

"I'm not here even in an official capacity, really," Peridot admitted, hoping it would gain her trust. "Meeting you is more...personal curiosity, let's say."

"Then why should I talk to you?" Lapis asked. Though her voice was no longer a shout, rather low and weary. "Why should I trust you?"

Peridot didn't have answer to that. So she decided to brazen it out.

"I don't know," she said with a theatrical sigh. "You have no reason to trust me, I guess. We're only the loosest of acquaintances and I guess there's no obvious way for me to prove my good faith. But I'm thinking you don't have much anyone you can trust. And maybe, just possibly...you could use a friend."

Lapis's expression didn't change. But she put her gun down on a dresser and walked over to the hotel bed. She sat down, crossing her arms and looking down at the floor. Peridot stood watching her, unsure what she should do.

"Everyone who tries to be my friend gets hurt," Lapis admitted. "In one way or another. Guess I'm a bad luck charm."

Peridot walked closer to her, relieved that the imminent danger of getting shot had ended. She suspected, correctly, that Lapis might just want to spill her guts, and she made herself ready to listen.

"I know I deserve it," Lapis continued, "for all the awful things I've done over the years. But it doesn't seem right that other people have to get burned, too. I haven't spoken to my parents in years. Not that they'd talk to me anyway if they knew about..."

And she stopped herself. There were some things she wouldn't admit to a stranger.

"Anyway...I'm still not sure why you're here. If you're not doing it in an "official capacity," then why would you drive all this way to meet me?"

**Because you wouldn't listen to me and come to Georgetown, Peridot thought.**

"Color me curious," Peridot said again. "I'm piecing together a lot of interesting things in my research, but no one wants to listen. And no one seems able to tell me anything. All the witnesses I've heard from are being very reticent about offering me anything. At least when they meet Peridot Khoury, aide to Senator Dewey. When they meet Peridot Khoury, fake detective, they open up a little more."

She offered a half-smile. But Lapis just scowled.
"Maybe there's a reason these people don't want to talk to you," Lapis grumbled. "Maybe it's for
your own good."

Peridot knew, from a lifetime of slights and condescension, that people who told you things they did,
or didn't do, were "for your own good" thought of you as sub-mental pond scum unable to handle
hard truths. She really hoped Lapis wasn't the same way. But her inscrutability made it hard to tell.

She was struck, more than anything, by how sad Lapis seemed. How broken. It wasn't just that she
was paranoid or angry - those were easily deciphered as a front, a coping mechanism. But it broke
Peridot's heart how empty she appeared, just from talking to her. From seeing her, for the first time.

She barely seemed human, just a burnt-out husk. Only her eyes, intense and burning bright blue,
betrayed any sign of life; her clothes were drab and unattractive, her hair a dim black streaked with
faded blue dye, freckles virtually invisible on her face, her body extremely, perhaps unhealthily thin.
And Peridot felt that, whatever Lapis had done or experienced, she was way too young to be
so...defeated.

"I'll be the judge of what's for my own good," Peridot said quietly.

Lapis sighed, realizing that she wasn't going to get rid of her guest. So she laid back on the bed for a
minute, staring at the ceiling, her hair cascading down around her.

"If you can do that," she said, "you're a better judge than me."

She closed her eyes and smiled. Peridot edged a little closer, putting a hand on a bed post.

"You ever remember a time when you were just...I dunno, happy?" Lapis said, her eyes still closed.
"Whenever things are completely miserable, there's some point in your life, something in your past
that you can always go back to and just...remember that things don't have to be this way?"

"Oh, definitely," Peridot nodded.

"I have lots of moments like that," Lapis said. "Only, not really. I guess my childhood could have
been worse. And my college years, before...Well, let's just say for now most of those memories come
tinged with sadness or regret. Some sign that things are gonna get worse immediately after a little joy
comes along. I wish I could just have one pure, happy memory. Right now, that would be enough
for me."

After another moment, she opened her eyes and turned over on her side, staring at Peridot.

"Well, what do you want to know?" Lapis asked, with a wan smile that broke Peridot's heart.

Lapis couldn't remember that night at all. She couldn't remember what happened, except for
fragments that forced her way through the consciousness.

She remembered a guy named Peter Melvin, one of those campus intellectuals who walks
everwhere with a volume of Marx or Marcuse in his arms. She vaguely remembered him trying to
explain One-Dimensional Man to her in the most condescending way imaginable...

She remembered Catherine, trying to convince her not to go to the party, that all the people there
were radicals or counterculture people, that she'd attract attention...

She thought she remembered a kiss, but couldn't even be clear on whether it actually happened or
was just wishful thinking...
She remembered Peter giving her drinks as he spewed nonsense about the proletariat and how things weren't gonna change no matter who was president, that the people had to take direct action...

Swirls of cigarette smoke, the faint smell of cheap alcohol...a blur of Hendrix and Joplin with a smear of rambling dialectics...

Her main memory was more a sensation of being uncomfortable, of hating it, of wondering why she was here rather than doing something fun. Why she was spending time with a boy rather than Catherine.

Maybe that was it. Maybe she was still ashamed of discovering who she was, even if it made her happy.

She did remember a conversation she'd had with her mother a few nights before the party. Or at least parts of it.

"Mom, I know this girl who...she likes girls."

"What do you mean, she likes girls?"

"Like...romantically likes them."

"Women like that don't exist, sweetie. If they like women, they aren't women."

"Well, this girl I know is as feminine as you or me."

"There's something wrong with her...I don't want you spending time with people like that. Whatever they are. Might corrupt you."

Corruption. That's how her mom viewed love.

She had turned that conversation over in her mind a million times, trying to convince herself that her parents' thoughts didn't matter. But realizing that they did. Realizing that some people would never accept or understand her. And that broke her heart.

She still couldn't remember much about the party, but she could guess from what memories. That she had tried convincing herself that she was normal, and Catherine wasn't. That in order to get Catherine from her mind, she would have to find some boy - any boy - and go on a date with them. Let them take you to a party. Maybe even let them feel you up or make out with you or possibly even go all the way.

Be a girl. Be a woman. Be normal.

She could also guess that someone put something in her drink. Because when she woke up, she was in bed with a girl she'd never seen before.

She remembered flashes of light and murmured voices. Wondered if they were all a dream. They sure didn't feel like it.

Her first inkling that it was more than just a bad, awkward party came when she received a phone call from someone two days later. She didn't seem able to rid herself of a headache, so she wasn't happy when someone called her in her dorm early in the morning.
“Ms. Lazuli,” a calm male voice came on the other line, "my name is Christian Edwards. Would like to speak with you about, erm, what happened the other night.”

"What happened the other night?" Lapis said, not entirely feigning amnesia.

"Something I don't think your mother would approve of..."

Lapis hung up the phone in fear and anger. Wondering just what had happened. If someone knew.

The phone rang a few seconds later. Lapis’s first instinct was to rip it out of the wall. But she answered it cautiously.

"Hello?" Lapis answered, trembling with fear.

Instead of a live voice, she heard what sounded like a recording. Heavy, erotic breathing, a cry of passion, a satisfied moan. Two female voices whispering sweet nothings to each other. The sticky sounds of loud kissing.

It took her a long moment to realize that one of the voices, one of the breathers and criers was...

It was her.

Lapis slammed down the telephone and recoiled from it. Yet she stood petrified, staring at the phone, waiting for it to ring again. Knowing it would ring again.

After an eternity it finally did. She picked it up without saying anything.

"Now I hope you understand," Edwards said on the other end. "I wish to meet with you as soon as we can. This is only a sample of what

"What do you want? Money?" Lapis rambled. "I don't have any money! My family could barely afford to send me to college. What do you want? Do you just get your sick kicks from ruining someone's life?"

"I'd say you'd ruined your own life," Edwards hissed. "Except you don't have to. Let's meet somewhere private."

"What do you want from me?" Lapis demanded, trembling so hard she made the phone shake.

"For now? Meet me at the Good Sweeney restaurant later today. We'll talk then."

"What time?"

"What time are you done with class? Wouldn't want to harm your academic career."

"Fuck you!" Lapis screamed - the first time she'd used that word in her life.

"All right, let's say around 5:00. I'll pay for dinner. It's the least I can do."

Then he hung up before Lapis could say anything. She sunk to her knees and cried, feeling so alone and trapped and helpless she couldn't move.

"That is...wow."

Peridot genuinely did not know how to react to Lapis's story. She wanted to reach out and give her a
hug, or some comfort, but realized that Lapis wouldn't appreciate any physical contact.

"I'm so sorry," Peridot offered lamely. Lapis sat on the bed with her head between her knees, rocking back and forth like a scared child.

"The whole thing was a joke," she muttered. "A sad, stupid, ugly fucking joke. They thought I was a radical or something because I went to that party. Instead they found out that I was a lesbian. That I liked girls. Because that's the worst thing you could be in the world."

"So...they are..." Peridot tiptoed gingerly around what she really wanted to know. Lapis stretched out her legs and looked at the floor, sighing. Then she turned to Peridot and muttered:

"The CIA."

This came to Peridot as a shock. Somehow she'd thought that Lapis worked for the FBI's COINTELPRO program, one of the subjects she'd been researching for Senator Dewey. Maybe because she somehow associated her with Pearl, who had worked for the FBI and may have been privy to Hoover's efforts to undermine progressive and radical groups.

"Operation CHAOS," she said. Lapis snickered.

"Well, they didn't tell me the name," she said. "At least at the time. I had to find it out myself."

"And what did you do for them?"

"I informed. I spied. I pretended I was a radical and I gave them information about different antiwar groups on campus. Kid's stuff."

She shook her head ruefully. "I mean, think about it. They probably could have paid me a bribe or something like they did with other people. Like, I was a college student, I could have used the money. I don't know why they had to..." She couldn't finish the sentence, feeling disgust and shame rising within her. "Anyway to save a few bucks, I guess."

"How long did you...?"

"Until 1972. Then I quit. Something happened that...People died. People I knew. All because of me."

Peridot decided not to press Lapis. She was looking down at the floor again, her face masked in deep sadness.

"I'm sorry," Peridot offered lamely.

"You're not the one who should be sorry," Lapis responded.

"But it wasn't your fault," Peridot said. "Not if they tricked or trapped you into doing it." Her hopefulness came back into her voice. "And now, if you testify about it..."

"I don't want to testify," Lapis said, suddenly angry. "I don't think it's going to do me any good. They're already watching me. I know they're going to hurt or kill me if I do anything more."

"Is they...?"

"I don't know who they are, exactly. Could be the CIA, but I doubt it. They're being really careful these days. Maybe just someone else who knows."
Peridot thought about this and nodded. Thought back to the car bombing the previous week. And to Pearl. Wondering how all these things connected.

Patterns were beginning to emerge.

"I can get you protection," Peridot said. "Even if you don't want to testify...I could bring in US Marshals, or at least local police..."

"That wouldn't do me any good," Lapis said. "I have to fend for myself. Or at least, I'm not gonna get help from the authorities when the CIA's involved."

"But the CIA's charter doesn't allow them to operate on domestic soil..."

"Oh, please," Lapis laughed. "You really are naive, aren't you?"

"But you said yourself that they're being careful..."

"They're being careful not to involve themselves," Lapis corrected. "Doesn't mean they don't still have an interest in hiding things. Helping whoever's been watching me do...whatever they're planning to do."

Peridot shook her head. Either Lapis was immensely, hopelessly paranoid, or she was in the gravest possible danger.

She didn't know. But she took a chance. Decided to involve herself at whatever risk it would entail. Because some things matter more than getting into trouble.

She turned to Lapis and asked:

"What can I do to help?"
Peridot spend much of the day in the hotel room with Lapis. Her new acquaintance seemed relieved to have someone to share things about her past, yet she still seemed reticent and cold whenever Peridot asked more personal questions.

"Did you say you were from Ohio?"

"Yes."

"Where in Ohio?"

"Cincinnati."

"Huh. I've been to Cleveland once or twice, but never Cincinnati. What was that like?"

"Not much to say. When I was growing up it basically a small town pretending to be a big city. Very close-knit and conservative and...not always the easiest for a kid to get along in."

And that was about all she got from her. It was frustrating.

Peridot thought, at first, that she should try keeping a clinical detachment. That Lapis, being a witness, wasn't anyone she wanted as a friend, and she shouldn't treat her as one. But she couldn't help feeling for the girl, however cold and distant she acted, and wished there was some way to make her feel better.

It was Peridot's fatal flaw. She liked helping people. But she didn't know whether it was from virtue or just a craving to be liked herself. She wished she could figure it out.

After sporadic questioning about her informant days, the two of them finally spaced out, sitting awkwardly. Lapis stayed on the bed with her knees around her head, staring blankly at the wall, the floor, the blanket - everything but Peridot. Peridot twitched and fiddled around with her hands, unsure what to do.

Then Lapis turned on the television.

"Most of the channels are showing the hearings," she said with annoyance. Sure enough, there was coverage on one network; Peridot recognized Fritz Schwarz with his weird buzz-saw hairdo asking another bureaucrat questions about intelligence operations. "Exactly what I want to escape from."

Which isn't how Peridot felt - she wished she could be taking part in the hearings. But her boss had decided that she couldn't be of any help - that she was only good for answering phones.

"Well, what else is there?" Peridot said. "Would be nice if they showed movies during the middle of the day."

"Movies," Lapis said blankly. "Yeah."
"It's been awhile since I've seen any," Peridot said. "I watched *The Parallax View* last fall, but..." She remembered thinking it was ridiculous at the time, with its convoluted story about government assassins and cover-ups, but now it struck as practically a documentary.

"Hmm. *The Great Waldo Pepper*.”

"What's that? Something about a Pepper?"

"It's a movie with Robert Redford," Lapis said. "He's like a stunt pilot or something. I saw it up in Bensalem a few days ago. It was...not good." She smirked. "Guess you could say *The Great Waldo Pepper*...isn't so great."

It was the lamest joke on Earth, and Lapis knew it. But Peridot, to her surprise, laughed uproariously in her honking nasal voice. Which just made Lapis more uncomfortable.

She found a station that wasn't showing the hearings. Instead, it aired *The Guiding Light*, a wretched soap opera that Peridot had caught once or twice in snippets during her off-days and regarded it with the same disdain all thinking people pretended to have about all soap operas.

"You watch this garbage?" Peridot asked, wrinkling her nose. Lapis just shrugged and laid back on the bed.

Peridot just sat on the edge of the bed next to Lapis. She struggled to follow the labyrinthine plotting, with its murders and romances and illnesses and double crosses, in-jokes and character references that only someone who'd been watching the show since 1952 could truly understand. Yet despite herself, she was hooked within minutes, watching it intently, rapt with incredulity and absorption. After it was over, she grabbed a piece of hotel stationery and started plotting out different character relationships and subplots, hoping to make sense of it. Meanwhile Lapis turned down the volume on the TV as a news program came on, and whipped out her Leon Uris book.

"So, if I'm following this right, Joe was shot by somebody named Kit in a fight over a woman a couple of years ago? And it gave him a heart condition? But how does that even work? Guns don't work that way! Unless he shot him with that CIA heart attack gun and it messed up."

"It's a soap opera," Lapis said blandly. "You're not supposed to follow everything."

"But if I can't make sense of all the story lines, how am I supposed to understand what's going on?" Peridot demanded.

"If only you could help me make sense of this," Lapis chuckled, holding up her novel.

"Leon Uris? Blech!" Peridot spat. "I read *Exodus* years ago and fell asleep! Worst book I've ever read. And the movie put me to sleep, too. That was...more embarrassing. Because it was in a theater. Even Paul Newman couldn't make it interesting."

"This one's about a libel trial in England. Not exactly the most gripping material."

"That sounds more up my alley," Peridot admitted. "Courtroom dramas are kinda my thing. Better than soap operas, anyway. Or long and boring political rants. You'd think I'd love those, but..."

"I don't read that much," Lapis admitted, "but I have friends recommend me things all the time. Sometimes it's garbage like this, sometimes it's romance novels. Sometimes it's *Carrie*." (Lapis smiled at this, like it was a private joke.) "Either way, I don't have a television where I live, so what do I have to lose?"
Peridot wracked her brain for the last novel she'd read, but the only one she could think of was some Allen Drury political potboiler that was, if anything, worse than Leon Uris.

"At least you have time to read," she huffed. "My job devours me whole. Don't have any time for books or movies or friends, and not much television either."

"Hmm. Can't imagine working for a Congressman is a lot of fun."

"Well, he's a Senator. And no, it's not. Nobody thinks...Gah, I don't wanna bore you."

"Hmm. Well, I'm not going anywhere. Bore away."

Peridot looked over her shoulder at Lapis. Her signs of distress and discomfort were gone, and she reclined back against the bed, book on her chest, her right leg crossed over her left. And to Peridot's surprise, there was a sincere, welcoming smile on her face - far from the smirk that Peridot was already used to.

And she looked beautiful.

"People don't take women seriously," Peridot admitted. "Especially people in Washington. Can't believe we're living in the 1970s and I have to say that, but...Jeez, I work harder than anyone in that office but because I don't have the right genitals or the perfect last name..."

"I know how that is," Lapis said. "Growing up Italian in the Midwest...wasn't always fun."

"You think that's bad? Try being Lebanese. Even a Christian one. The kids don't care about that, they just call you names..."

Lapis leaned forward, curious to confirm her acquaintance's words. "Huh. I wouldn't have guessed."

"Yeah well, like I always say, I got my dad's complexion and my mom's hair and...well, my voice is my own abomination." The same joke she'd told Pearl a few days earlier. Clearly, she needed new material.

Fortunately, Lapis giggled. "Your voice is just fine. I mean, it suits you perfectly."

"I guess that's a complement," Peridot grumbled. But she and Lapis shared another knowing glance, and Peridot felt warmth sparkling between them. She wasn't sure yet what it meant, but it was definitely better than cold diffidence and mutual suspicion.

"You wanna grab something for dinner?" she asked.

"Really?" Lapis said. "It's only 3:30."

"Well, it doesn't have to be right now," Peridot said. She saw Lapis's face twist in curiosity, and suddenly grew flustered. Why, she didn't know.

"I mean, we can order in if that's okay," she said, starting to ramble. "I mean, I know we're here on secret business and we're trying to keep a low profile and..."

Lapis put her book down on the side table and sat up, putting a hand on Peridot's shoulder. And the smile returned. She was now close enough that Peridot could hear her breathing and smell her perfume and see the flecks of gold sparkling in her blue eyes.

"You've sold me," Lapis said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Just...let me put on something nice,
They had dinner at the seafood restaurant across the street. The tacky "island" decor made Peridot cringe, but Lapis didn't seem to mind. In fact, she seemed to love it.

"Look at this, Peridot," Lapis called, leaning against a wooden carving of an island chief. She made a pouty face, then kissed the statue on the cheek, making Peridot crack up laughing. A somewhat bewildered hostess appeared and ushered the girls to a table.

Rather than the frumpy olive-gray outfit she'd been wearing in the hotel room, Lapis now wore a dark blue sundress with black across the waist, showing off a tiny slit of her midriff, with a necklace and silver arm bracelet. Peridot, still wearing her work clothes, felt a little embarrassed, but Lapis didn't seem to mind that, either.

It seemed odd. Peridot couldn't decide whether she was just being charmed and flattered by this girl willing spending time with her, as if they were friends and not just a government aide and a potential witness. Or if she liked her. Like, really liked her.

It was an alien sentiment to Peridot. She'd had crushes on people in school, been on a few disastrous dates, but no one seemed to click. Mostly she'd admired movie stars and literary characters in recent years, who couldn't reciprocate and break your heart and judge you on your shortcomings. She seemed to find both men and women attractive, which didn't worry her overmuch because it's not like anyone wanted her.

Yet being with Lapis tonight, looking dressed up like she was going to a swanky party or, indeed, a date, she wondered.

"This is so nice," Lapis admitted as she fiddled with her drink straw.

"This is very tacky," Peridot glowered, still looking at the decor.

"I mean, it's not the classiest place in the world, but I mean, getting to go out." She let out a long, heavy sigh that practically made her glass vibrate.

"Go out with someone else," she continued. "Someone my own age."

Peridot smiled. "Yeah," was all she could think to say.

They each ordered a fish meal. Peridot didn't know why she ate it - she hated fish, ordinarily, having grown up in a seaside town and had a steady, endless diet of fish and crustaceans. But tonight she was eating sole like it was her favorite dish. And Lapis was positively devouring her breaded cod.

"So, now that we know each other a little bit," Lapis said, "something I want to ask you."

Peridot felt a twinge of excitement in her chest. "Yeah?"

"Something I've wanted to ask someone for a long time."

Peridot didn't know what that meant, but convinced herself it was still a good sign. She nodded and leaned forward.

"Do you think I should dye my hair again?"

Peridot's smile sunk into an awkward frown. And Lapis noticed.
"That bad an idea, huh?" she said, sounding disappointed.

"No, no!" Peridot assured her. "It's just..."

She half wanted to say, *I was expecting you to ask me something more...Bah, you stupid clod! No one's ever gonna think about you like that! Just remember that she's an informant, not a cute girl you met in the library one day. Get a grip.*

"I mean, I hadn't thought about it." In the restaurant's dim light, the streaks of blue in Lapis's hair were barely visible.

"I had blue hair during most of my time in college," Lapis explained. "I mean, it was part of my whole image, I guess. When I was working for..." And she stopped herself, biting her lip. "But it's been awhile since I've tried to dye it. It just seemed simpler. Problem is, the dye killed my roots and washed out the hair. So when it's the natural black, it's more kinda coal-gray."

Peridot examined her hair, which was relatively short but scraggly, like she hadn't cut it in months. She thought it looked cute, but didn't say anything.

"Maybe some conditioner or something..." she started.

"Maybe," Lapis said. "That's not something I've worried about in the past, though. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"I mean, look at my hair," Peridot joked. "Just a big yellow mess. Not like I'm one to give advice."

"It looks good on you, though," Lapis insisted. And Peridot felt her heart skip another beat.

*Don't get your hopes up, clod,* she reminded herself. *You are Peridot, after all.*

"My problem is, I like to weigh all options," Peridot said, adopting an officious tone. "On the one hand, I think you look nice with black hair. But, it might require a bit of work to get it to, erm, peak condition. On the other hand, blue is nice, but it does kind of make you stand out. And considering your current circumstances...maybe that's not wise."

"Hmm. I hadn't thought about it that way," Lapis admitted. She looked down at her plate and pushed a carrot around with her fork.

"Guess I can't be myself if I'm in hiding, huh?" After a few hours' remission, the sadness returned to her voice.

Peridot hastened to comfort her.

"Well, if you feel like you need blue hair to be yourself, then do it!" she said. "That's what counts. Not what's careful or expedient or whatever. Do what makes you feel good."

Lapis looked up and gave her a wan smile.

"Something to think about, at least," Peridot shrugged.

Lapis stared at her for a long moment. She still had that curious Mona Lisa smile, as if she was trying to read Peridot's face and thoughts, trying to figure out what was going through her mind. Peridot wondered if she could, or whether that was a good thing.

For a long moment, it became awkward again.
Then Lapis sat back, opened her mouth, and belched.

Peridot stared at her incredulously. Then Lapis started giggling at her reaction. And before long, both girls were laughing uproariously at each other.

"It feels so good to be silly," Lapis admitted. "It's been so long since I've..."

Peridot nodded in sympathy. She didn't need to explain herself again.

Then, to her surprise, Lapis put a hand on her wrist.

"Thank you, Peridot," she said. "It's so good...so good not to be alone."

Peridot suddenly felt herself trembling, her mouth go dry, her thoughts clouded with fear and confusion and excitement. After a long moment, she managed to stammer:

"Please, call me Perry."

Peridot didn't want to press her luck, however sweet and accommodating Lapis seemed to be. She had the hotel manager send a cot to Lapis's room for her to sleep on. Maybe some distance would still help.

Lapis seemed to take it the wrong way, though. She shot Peridot a disappointed look when the cot arrived, and went over to the bed reading her book while Peridot fumbled with it, trying to set it up, snapping the legs shut on her hand. Even Peridot's sharp cry of pain didn't elicit much react from Lapis, who made her standard "hmm" noise and turned a page of her book.

Well, you've messed it up, Peridot told herself afterwards, washing her face in the bathroom. Just like you thought. If she liked you, it doesn't matter now, because you pissed her off.

At least it helped Peridot remember why she was there in the first place. Not wanting to alarm Lapis (or maybe, still not trusting her), she went to a payphone in the hotel lobby and placed a call. Fortunately, she had a photographic memory for numbers and didn't need to write it down.

"Y'ello," a voice came across the other line.

"Hello, this is Peridot Khoury," Peridot said. "Is Pearl White available?"

"No, this is her roommate Amethyst. Something I can help you with?"

"I would really need to speak with Pearl directly," she said. "I'm from Senator Dewey's office, and we've spoken before. Is there a better time I could reach her?"

"Oh, you're that...Actually, Pearl's been trying to reach you. But she's out right now. Not sure when she'll be back. Can I get her to call you back?"

"Perhaps, I'd have to get the number. I'm a hotel right now and I'm not sure... Anyway, I don't wanna say too much over the phone...not because I don't trust you, you understand. Just..."

"Nah, it's cool. We're pretty much on a need-to-know basis around here. If Pearl thinks it's important to tell us, she'll tell us."

"Okay," Peridot sighed. Though Amethyst's comment raised her suspicions. But maybe she was just being paranoid.
"I'll tell her you called, okay?" Amethyst continued. "Maybe try again in an hour or two. I'm sure Pearl wants to talk to you, the way she mentioned your name today. She'll be in touch."

"Something good I hope," Peridot joked.

Amethyst hung up without saying another word. Not an encouraging sign.

Feeling defeated yet again - could she do nothing right? - Peridot went to the hotel bar and ordered a beer. What had started as an exciting day, then a pleasant one, had become another defeat in an endless line.

She was a bit upset that she couldn't get Pearl, but more upset that she seemed to have alienated Lapis. For a brief moment, it seemed like there might have been something there...maybe even more than a cooperative witness. A friend. Someone she could connect with and confide in and be herself in a way her few "friends" rarely allowed her to.

Or possibly, just possibly, in her wildest dreams, even more than that.

And now she, Peridot Khoury, had fucked it up.

Naturally.

What a clod.

Well, fuck her, she thought to herself, rounding her resentment on the girl with the blue dress and the faded hair and wrecked countenance and gorgeous eyes...I'll go back to DC tonight. Maybe not even tell her, just for the hell of it. Maybe get the FBI or the US Marshals to look after her.

Maybe, she thought in the depths of her beer and bitterness, just forget about her altogether. She didn't want to cooperate - she wanted to hide. So screw her. Leave her alone here and go back to Washington and apologize to your boss and let things go back to normal.

But then she realized she couldn't do that. That she'd promised not to let Lapis alone while her.

 Curse me for having a conscience, Peridot thought to herself, absently munching on a beer nut.

"Phone call for you," someone said, cutting through her thoughts.

"Huh?"

"Ms. Khoury, right?" the bartender said. "There's a Pearl White calling you. You can take it either here or in the phone booth in the next room."

Peridot slammed down the rest of her drink and rushed out, not even responding to the bartender. She went into the phone booth and picked up the receiver.

"Pearl?" she said.

"Perry?" the familiar voice came across the other line. "Yes, I'm sorry I missed you earlier, I was out."

 Did I give her roommate my number? Peridot wondered. She didn't remember doing that.

"Listen, I have something big to tell you," Pearl continued. "Remember that woman you mentioned to me the other day? Lapis Lazuli?"
Peridot nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Well, I've discovered something indicating that she's in the gravest possible danger."

Peridot's blood ran cold.

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm up in Hagerstown," Peridot said, then instantly regretting it. Wondering how much she could trust Pearl.

Or if their phone was being tapped.

"I'm calling you from a payphone," Pearl assured her, as if she'd read her thoughts. "There's been someone murdering committee witnesses over the past few weeks, and..."

She left the thought hang in the air.

"Are you safe?" Peridot asked.

"Don't worry about me," Pearl said haughtily. "Have you been in touch with Ms. Lazuli?"

She looked over her shoulder and wondered whether to tell Pearl. Whether she could trust her. Should she know? Would it matter?

Finally, she stammered: "I-I'm with her right now."

"Peridot," Pearl said, adopting a motherly tone. "Can you stay with her?"

"Of course," Peridot said.

"Listen to me. I know we've only known each other for a few weeks, and that our acquaintance...hasn't always been pleasant. But you've got to trust me. If Ms. Lazuli is in danger, and if I'm in danger, you're in danger too. And it's even more important that we work together until the danger has passed. Do you understand?"

"Work together how?" Peridot said. Then she remembered Pearl's comment about working outside the system...and her roommate's comment.

Patterns were emerging. Again.

"Can I meet you somewhere?" Pearl insisted. "Wait, no, I don't want you to leave her alone. Can I come up to Hagerstown?"

Peridot started to sweat, feeling a chill pass through her body as she hesitated.

_I can't trust anyone_, she told herself. _How can you trust Pearl? How does she even know about this stuff? How did she know your phone number? Maybe she's a plant. She did work for the FBI after all._

But then, she thought about Lapis. And about Pearl. And herself. And her mission to save the nation from its worst impulses.

And realized that whatever was happening now, there was no going back.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who's been reading and offering kudos over the past few days! I appreciate it. Besides the plot, I'm hoping to flesh out some more characters' backstories soon; it may require a little more thought and research, but hopefully it'll be worth it.
September 25, 1975

Hagerstown, MD

Lapis lay on the bed, still wearing her dress and an angry, disappointed scowl. She pretended to read but wasn't really paying attention to her book. Too much going through her mind right now.

She glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand next to her: 9:30 pm. Still too early for bed. Then at the awkwardly assembled cot at the front of the room.

She didn't know where Peridot had gone, and didn't care. Probably left her here, alone. Probably drove back to Washington and the government and whatever ambitious, selfish, heartless mess she came from and abandoned Lapis here.

She had seemed so nice, Lapis thought as she read the same line of her book over and over again, unable to digest it. She seemed to actually want to know me. To care about me. Maybe even to like me.

Don't kid yourself, Lapis, she told herself, shaking her head as if to banish those thoughts. Peridot would never like you as a person. The thought would never occur to her. She's using you. Like everyone else you've ever met...

Having thoroughly depressed herself, Lapis abandoned any pretense of staying awake. She unbuckled her bracelet and put it on the nightstand with her book. She turned out the light and laid down, staring at the ceiling until her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Examining shadows. Enjoying her loneliness. Until it sunk in how lonely she really was.

Time melted away. The next time she looked at her clock, it was almost 11:00.

Then the door creaked open. Lapis jolted her head until she recognized Peridot's silhouette in the doorway, then laid on her side, pretending to be asleep. Even when Peridot walked over to her.

"Lapis?" she asked quietly. "You awake? Lapis?"

This just made Lapis clench her eyes shut harder. Please go away and leave me alone, she silently urged Peridot.

"Lapis, I..." She heard Peridot's voice stumble, trying to find the right words. And Lapis opened her eyes, half-prepared to listen.
But nothing further came. Peridot sighed instead and walked over to the bathroom. Lapis could hear her brushing her teeth and washing up, and sighed herself.

She felt tears welling up in her eyes. Really wishing that she’d been wrong about her friend. Not that she needed Peridot to be in love with her or sleep with her or anything (though she did find the awkward little blonde cute, in a frazzled sort of way). Just to be a friend and offer company and listen. To share some simple, human kindness with Lapis.

Was that so much to ask for? For just one person in this fucked-up world to be nice and decent and kind?

Apparently so. Not that she, of all people, deserved it.

Lapis sobbed silently as Peridot exited the bathroom and crawled into her cot. Wishing that she had the courage or the will to break her silence. Instead, she cried.

She wondered if Peridot could hear her...and whether it would matter if she did.

"Gotta get down to it"

"Soldiers are cutting us down"

"Should have been done long ago"

May 1970 was a nightmare. Nixon invaded Cambodia, expanding a war he'd pledged to end, and the nation's campuses exploded in protests, riots and general unrest. Just a few hours from Lapis's campus, four students, two of them innocent bystanders, were shot by National Guardsmen at Kent State. (Another shooting at Jackson State in Mississippi received less attention, mostly because the students were black.) Lapis still couldn't listen to Neil Young's "Ohio" without crying, thinking how easily one of the victims could have been her. And, sometimes, wishing it had been.

"What if you knew her"

"And found her dead on the ground?"

President Nixon first condemned the students as bums and troublemakers, then backed off his criticisms, then met with a group of them outside the Lincoln Memorial, an awkward meeting which began in bafflement and ended in mutual incomprehension. In New York, attempts to honor the dead at Kent State were met with violence by flag-waving construction workers who smashed hippies and stockbrokers with their hardhats, earning an invitation to the White House. So much for bringing America together.

"How can you run when you know?"

And Lapis Lazuli, apolitical college student, became Laura Teal, CIA informant.

Her handler was that Christian Edwards creep, who was apparently in his early thirties but looked and sounded like a constipated bureaucrat. She guessed working for the CIA sucks away your youth along with your morals and human feelings.

"I won't give you too many explicit instructions," Edwards had told Lapis during her meeting. "That's not how we operate. You're already in touch with Peter Melvin, who's organizing a protest group on campus. Just join his group and see how things go from there."
“Your first goal will be to funnel us information about the group’s activities,” he explained. “Planned protests or marches or acts of violence and subversion, should it come to that. Your second goal is to destroy the group from within. Undermine it. Make them claw each other’s eyes out so they’re easier for law enforcement to take care of them.

“How do you want me to do that?” Lapis asked.

“However you see fit,” Edwards said. “There are a lot of ways. Start rumors. Poison pen letters. Sleep with different members and turn them against each other.”

“I’m not sleeping with...” Lapis stopped herself when she saw Edwards leering with satisfaction.

“Not sure I’d leave you to your own devices in that department,” the Agent jeered. “But, you don’t have to...Be creative. You’re a bright girl, you’ll figure something out.”

Lapis decided to make herself over. Her name was the first thing - Laura Teal, the first of many aliases she’d adopt. (Peter Melvin might remember her real name, but then she could pretend it was an alias. Wheels within fucking wheels.) She cut her long black hair short and dyed it a dark cobalt blue. She decided to dress in more revealing, casual outfits in what she hoped was an effort to blend in. Though her hair wouldn’t help with that.

Now, having transformed herself and swallowed her soul, she just needed to get in touch with her targets. She hoped she could remember Peter’s address or phone number, or some way to contact.

“Protests aren’t gonna cut it, man,” Peter said, a scraggly bundle of energy in a denim jacket.

His pal, a shaggy but better-dressed man named Louie Bishop, disagreed. “If we act violent we’ll spawn violence against us,” he said. “The State has far more resources than we do...”

“Peaceful resistance won’t cut it any more, Louie. We’re at war now.”

“All the more reason to be careful. If we just start throwing rocks and bombs, we’re gonna get shot. And where will our revolution be then?”

“I know some folks on other campuses are already going underground.”

“Then go fucking join them, Pete! You don’t want a revolution, you just fucking want to play martyr and get your name in the paper! Some of us want to live and actually make a difference.”

“I’d rather die on my feet than live on my knees.”

“Yeah yeah, and I am Spartacus. Fuck you.”

Lapis watched the two men volley insults and strategy from the side, more annoyed than anything. Both of them were nerds playing alpha male, and it was really, really tiresome to watch.

On the sidelines, a demure blonde named Sandra watched silently, smoking a joint. She was Pete’s girlfriend, accompanying him everywhere yet always silent and on the sidelines, cowed into submission.

It hadn’t taken much to persuade Lapis that there wasn’t any room for ladies here. Any attempt to interject an opinion would lead to condescending looks, if not insults. If not a recitation of Stokeley Carmichael’s chauvinist joke about the position of women.
Their cell wasn't too big - besides the four of them here assembled, they had a dozen other members who mostly only showed up for parties and the occasional protest. Lapis couldn't blame them, because the strategy meetings and rap sessions always devolved into this nonsense.

Mostly, their arguments were tactical, since both were Marxist bullshitters. Louie had big plans for a big organization that could endure and make a lasting difference. Pete just wanted to wreck things and have done with the System.

Lapis's job was to ensure that they remained at each other's throats. Though it didn't look like she needed to do much work.

"Well, fuck you, pal," Louie said storming out of the room. "Dying is easy - living is harder. Think you'll have to learn that the hard way."

"Long Live the Revolution," Peter said, flipping him the bird as he left.

Lapis rolled her eyes then looked over at Sandra, who stared blankly past them. Peter gestured to Sandra and she obediently skittered out of the room, leaving Lapis sitting on the floor with Peter standing over her.

"What a fucking turkey," Peter muttered. "Louie really thinks he's Bakunin or some shit. Well, sure, let's see where your fine words and speeches and your pressed shirts" (he said this part with comical disdain) "get you during a war with reactionary America."

Lapis nodded, getting up to go. She had her limits and Peter had long since.

She started moving towards the door when Peter stepped in her way, kicking the door shut with his foot.

"Excuse me," she muttered.

"Say, I never got to thank you for giving me that new Who album," he said, smiling.

"No sweat," Lapis said, forcing herself to smile.

"Nah man, must be a completely different experience live. Best version of We're Not Gonna Take It I've heard."

"Sure."

"You know a lot about music," he said, starting to press close, breathing smelly breath into Lapis's face.

"I do," she affirmed.

"Well, then we have one more thing in common," he muttered.

Suddenly, he grabbed her arm and pulled Lapis close, trying to kiss and grope her. Lapis gasped and pushed him away.

"I thought you were with Sandra," Lapis said, backpedaling, trying to make a line of sight towards the door.

Peter winked and swaggered forward, aggressive and awkward at once.

"We, ah, all must do our part to smash monogamy," he muttered. "You know, the Weatherman
thing. Might make us closer as a unit."

Lapis rolled her eyes at this. Maybe they'd be closer if this dickhead stopped vomiting half-digested dialectic on everyone.

But she wondered if there was a way out. Right now it didn't look that way.

"I can't..." Lapis protested. "I'm not really...I don't think of you that way."

Peter scowled.

"What's wrong, Laura?" he asked menacingly. "Don't you like men? Are you some kinda dyke?"

The slur made Lapis gasp in terror and agony. Did he know, somehow?

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"I mean, there can only be two explanations," he said, backing her against a wall. "Either you're not a real comrade...or you don't like men."

Apparently he didn't know. He was just being a horny, chauvinist asshole. But that made things only marginally better.

"Don't call me that," she whispered.

Peter raised an eyebrow but didn't press the point. "Well, let's get it to it," he said. It wasn't a request. It was a command.

And trembling, practically crying, Lapis started undressing as he pressed against her.

She cried out as she felt him push her against a wall. And penetrate her. The experience was deeply unpleasant for Lapis, made her feel dirty and used, and she closed her eyes as he pounded away, hoping that it would dissipate her disgust and make it go faster.

It didn't.

She felt his gross, greedy hands touching her everywhere. Smelled his musky body and unwashed hair. Then she opened her eyes and saw a crab louse crawling across his eyebrow.

She felt her stomach churn, tried to prevent herself from vomiting. Then forced her eyes to close until he finished.

A few weeks later, with summer term about half over, Lapis made her play.

She'd taken part in a small antiwar demonstration on campus. Maybe 200 or 300 kids showed up, shouted some antiwar slogans, then went home without a fuss. It was a tiny victory, but on a conservative campus like this, one worth celebrating. Even if it did lead to graffiti and garbage thrown at their headquarters in Peter's apartment.

Now that she knew what kind of person Peter was - really, what most of them were on this campus, angry loudmouths without any real chance or hope of achieving anything, who played revolution to hear themselves talk and flip off their parents and get laid - she felt less

In a haze one night, listening to The Who's "Heaven and Hell," she typed a poison pen letter on a small typewriter borrowed from a classmate. It was addressed to Louie Bishop, and it read:
"Comrade Bishop,

"This is to let you know that Peter Melvin, your supposed comrade, is actually an agent provocateur working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He is working to provoke your cell to violent action in order to discredit them.

"Regards,

"A Concerned Comrade."

She felt a faint, perverse stab of satisfaction as she read the letter, stuffed it in an envelope, then dropped it in Louie Bishop's mailbox. Not because she believed in what she was doing, but because she didn't mind ruining Peter Melvin's life.

Perhaps even more two days later, when she watched the two "revolutionaries" go from arguments to accusations to an actual fistfight, as Sandra screamed and rushed about like a chicken. And Lapis watched with her arms folded, willing to let them fight it out.

She wrote another, similar letter to Peter a week later, labeling Louie Bishop "a reactionary infiltrator."

This resulted, one day, in Peter walking up to Louie one day on the campus green, in broad daylight and in view of about half the student body, and breaking his nose with a right hook and a cry of "fascist prick."

It was easy enough to break up the Oxford Four, as Lapis jokingly named their cell. Louie, his nose permanently crooked, retreated away from radicalism and became a quiet, reserved academic more interested in thought than revolution. Apparently he dropped out of school the following year, and became involved with a Weatherman splinter group based out of Columbus, being killed in a shootout with police in early 1973.

And Lapis Lazuli - or Laura Teal - continued her career as an agent of Operation CHAOS. And as she acted, her soul wept.

In her Catholic childhood, Lapis had concepts of Sin and Guilt pounded into her (thankfully, mostly figuratively) almost daily. By her parents, by her priest, by the Bible. She didn't really believe in God any more - considering her experiences, how could anyone? - but the guilt remained.

And she had plenty to be guilty about. She was a sinner and a liar and a fornicator. She had destroyed lives and ended two. It was her inability to be honest that led her down this past in the first place, pretending she liked boys rather than admitting otherwise. But it was her inability to resist that sin that forced her to lie.

Wheels within fucking wheels.

Unable to sleep, she stood up and saw that it was about 3:00 in the morning. She heard a breeze and the growl of car engines outside her hotel window.

She looked over at Peridot for a moment, fast asleep, having twisted the blanket into a pretzel around her body. Again, she made a move towards her, thinking to wake Peridot up and apologize and clear the air.

Again, she told herself there would be no point. She'd already lost her.
She stepped outside into the night, the sniff scent of a car exhaust hanging in the air. She coughed loudly as she stepped outside and leaned against the wall.

She thought about taking a swim, but hadn't brought her suit. So she just stood there, staring at the lights of the cars and the small town. Wondering how much longer she had to suffer.

______________________________

September 26, 1975
Washington, DC

In a small, darkened office, Jasper played a freshly received tape recording as an assistant took notes.

P. WHITE: "...Have you been in touch with Ms. Lazuli?"

P. KHOURY: "I'm with her right now."

P. WHITE: "Peridot, can you stay with her?"

P. KHOURY: "Of course."

P. WHITE: "Listen to me. I know we've only known each other for a few weeks, and that our acquaintance hasn't always been pleasant. But you've got to trust me. If Ms. Lazuli is in danger, and if I'm in danger, you're in danger too. And it's even more important that we work together until the danger has passed. Do you..."

She switched off the recorder and looked up at the six men assembled before her.

"Well, this makes it easier for all of us," she said with a weary smile. "We can eliminate the last two names on my list at once. Kill two birds, or two gems, with one stone."

"What about the aide, Ms. Khoury?" one of the men asked in a brusque Midwestern accent.

"If she dies, she dies," Jasper said. "She inserted herself into this mess."

"I don't know if our boss would like it if..."

Jasper stood up and stared the man in the eye across the room.

"I am your boss," she growled. And the man nodded sheepishly and took a step backwards.

"It's late and we've been working hard," Jasper said. "Sorry to drag you guys out of bed so late. Get a few hours' sleep then we'll take care of these assholes. If everything goes right, we'll be done by sundown tomorrow."

The men nodded and filed silently out of the room. Jasper sat down and sighed, resting her head in her hands.

"I don't think Aquamarine would like you talking like that," Jasper's assistant said as he closed his notepad.

"She isn't here," Jasper responded curtly, not looking up. "She put me in charge and that's that. If she objects, let her run this herself."

"You look tired," the assistant said.
"Just another headache," Jasper said dismissively. "Need a Bayer and some sleep and we'll be done. My God, I need some time off."

The assistant nodded and skittered out of the room. "Anything I can do?"

"Thanks Rick, but that will be all."

Jasper wouldn't admit it, but she was tired. Tired from a lifetime fighting boogeymen and bad guys and anyone the Company deemed an enemy. Tired of cleaning up other people's shit when she was supposedly retired.

Tired...and not a little worried.

Because she wondered, given her age and all the secrets she knew, if she wasn't expendable herself. If she wasn't on some other DIAMOND operative's list for a later date.

*We'll deal with that when we come to it*, she told herself as she stood up, preparing to leave. *Right now, I have a job to do.*

Chapter End Notes

This is my second story (after my Gravity Falls fic, Dipper and Wendy's Doomsday Defense) which uses "Ohio" as a leitmotif. It's just about perfect for both stories, though I'm inclined to blame having two huge Neil Young fans for parents.

I'll admit to having a somewhat jaundiced view of '60s radical groups, which may come down to bourgeois prejudices or else not having much fondness for people who would commit acts of terrorism for ephemeral causes. That and I've known the modern descendants of SDS and similar groups and they are, at the very least, insufferable. Brian Burrough's *Days of Rage: America's Radical Underground*, the FBI and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence (2015) is a go-to source here.
Amethyst

Chapter Notes

Another pretty intense chapter with more historical/political content, descriptions of violence and a few racial slurs (used in an appropriate context).

September 26, 1975

Somewhere along I-270

Amethyst drove the team, as usual. She didn't know why, since Pearl always complained that she drove like a crazy person. Indeed, just a little while ago she had earned an angry scolding from Pearl when she'd cut off a semi truck outside Rockville. She responded not by addressing Pearl, who wouldn't listen to her excuses anyway, but by flipping off the truck driver and cackling like a maniac as they sped past.

Which, for a long while, was the last sound any of them made.

The engine made weird sputtering noises, while a cheesy Glenn Campbell tune emanated from their beat-up radio. Amethyst's partners sat in the backseat, preparing their weapons. Garnet was quiet as always with concentration, Pearl evidently with worry. Amethyst wanted, but couldn't think of anything to say. It was too tense in that car.

Finally, Amethyst spoke up:

"So, what's the plan for this thing?"

Pearl looked up.

"Very simple," she said. "We scope out the hotel where Peridot and Lapis are staying. If they're secure and alone, I'll go in and meet them by myself. If not, we'll all go in together and prepare for a fight."

"Seems a bit risky," Amethyst said. "Wouldn't it be safer if we all went in case there was, like, an ambush or something?"

"I'm perfectly capable of handling myself," Pearl insisted. "Besides, they don't know you guys from Adam."

"Plus," Garnet said, "if they recognize Pearl they'll try to kill her, too. You'd better go in armed, just in case."

"It won't be easy to bring this saber into a clandestine meeting, though," Pearl insisted, turning her weapon over in her hands.

"You do it all the time," Garnet reminded her with a smile.

"That's in dark alleys and, you know, places we need to fight! Not a small hotel room with a
potential friend."

"Do you want to take a gun?"

"Of course not."

"Then sword it is."

"Besides, hate to admit it but if only one of us goes...you're the one least likely to draw attention to yourself," Amethyst noted. "Garnet is tall and black and, no offense, looks like Angela Davis..."

"Why would that give me offense?" Garnet asked.

"...and I'm me! And you know I'm about as discreet as a blowjob on a roller coaster!"

"Amethyst!" Pearl's face blanched in disgust, but Garnet burst out laughing. Amethyst smiled in satisfaction; she always counted it as a win when she could make Garnet laugh, as stoic as she was.

"Plus, she's talked to you, P," Amethyst said. "You're literally the only person they might trust. Me and Garnet come swaggerin' into a hotel room all tough and stuff, she'll freak out and runaway. But meek little Pearl..."

"I am not meek," Pearl objected.

"Okay, non-threatening Pearl..."

"You mean white Pearl," she said, with not a little irritation. Being the only Caucasian in their group occasionally made her uneasy.

"However you wanna say it..."

"You know, Ms. Khoury isn't white herself, so..."

"Actually no, you didn't mention that," Amethyst said. Garnet let out a "huh" and they drove silently for a moment.

"That's what you get for assuming things about people," Pearl chided triumphantly.

"What we get?" Amethyst mocked. "Like, a moment of awkwardness during a car ride? Some lesson."

"Still...It's not a good thing to assume things about people, regardless of who they are. Just because she works for the government doesn't mean she's a bad person. After all, look at me."

"Feh," Amethyst said. "P, you earned our trust like ten times over. This Peridot girl hasn't even talked to me or Garnet for more than a second."

Garnet nodded. "True, and you both know I feel about anyone connected with the government." (Pearl looked down at the floor of the car for a long moment.) "But on the other hand...she got in touch with us. She's putting herself in a huge bind just by talking with someone like Pearl or Lazuli outside of a work setting. Either she's a really good deep cover agent, which I'll admit isn't impossible, or she's sincere. And I'm willing to give her the benefit of the doubt."

Amethyst smirked and thought about this for a moment. She knew her friends had a point, and even if they didn't, Pearl was in danger as much as this Lazuli girl. But part of her still worried that they were driving into a trap.
Then, Amethyst burst into a big grin as the radio changed to a David Bowie song.

"All right, real music!" Amethyst whooped, and cranked up the volume, leaving her partners baffled and mildly irritated.

Sometimes Amethyst felt like her friends didn't take her seriously. Maybe because she was younger and more brash than either of them. Maybe because she was Puerto Rican. Though Pearl would deny it and Garnet resent it, even they weren't immune from prejudice, no matter how elevated they pretended to be. Even towards their own friend and partner.

Just a short, loudmouthed boricua with a short fuse and an inexplicable bloodlust. Just like everyone else saw her. No way she could have any actual motivations for joining the Crystal Gems. She was just a thug who enjoyed violence, nothing more.

Amethyst Marquez was born on October 17, 1950 in New York City. Her parents (her father a native who had managed a sugar factory, her mother a Panamanian national working as a secretary in San Juan), had left Puerto Rico in the late '40s for better opportunities. They had worked respectable, bourgeois jobs in their homeland, but weren't without connections.

One of Amethyst's uncles had been a nationalist who survived the Ponce Massacre of 1937, when the island's Insular Police fired machine guns into a peaceful demonstration, killing 21. Later, arrested on a trumped up charge, he served several months in jail and was subjected to torture before finally dying in 1945, just before World War II ended. The way Amethyst's parents made it sound, his death was what spurred their immigration in the first place.

Thirteen days after Amethyst's birth, the island erupted again. Several cities across Puerto Rico rose in a nationalist rebellion against the American oppressors. This came as a surprise to Americans who deigned to pay attention to it. They knew Puerto Rico as an island ruled benignly and happily by their white neighbors since 1898, not a quasi-colony whose people were forced to learn English in school, shunted into poor paying factory jobs and threatened with violence if they so much as breathed a word of independence (for decades, even flying the Puerto Rican flag landed one in jail). Most Anglos were too distracted by Korea and financial scandals and Red hunting and trying to select their next car and television set to really notice.

It was doomed from the start, amounting to scattered outbreaks of violence rather than a properly coordinated revolution. Most places there were a few brave, rash nationalists facing off police and National Guardsmen with machine guns and pistols...not that they were the only ones hurt. In response to a heavy-handed police crackdown in Jayuya, nationalists attacked the police, the post office and a number of other government officials...until American P-47s arrived and bombed the town to oblivion. This "incident between Puerto Ricans" marked a grim first - the only time in history that American military planes bombed their own citizens.

Fifteen days after Amethyst's birthday, two Puerto Rican nationalists from New York, Oscar Collazo and Grisielo Torresola, attacked President Harry Truman at his temporary residence at Blair House. A long, violent shootout erupted which left several police and Secret Service agents dead or injured. Had Truman looked out the window a moment sooner, had Officer Leslie Coffelt's dying bullet not splattered Torresola's brains all over the stairs as he reloaded his Luger, the President would have been shot, and American history might have changed.

Instead, the Anglo press wrote it off as a freak act of madmen, not a political act with a greater purpose. A novelty, if you will, even though Puerto Rican nationalists would shoot up the US Capitol a few years later, and a more radical fringe, in Amethyst's own day, would launch a widespread bombing campaign against the mainland United States.
Amethyst, for her part, didn’t like violence despite her brashness and background. She grew up in a rough neighborhood and watched friends and relatives get in trouble and drift into crime. She understood; her father, reasonably well-off in San Juan, was now forced to work a delivery job that caused its own dangers. (He was forced to carry a handgun after twice being robbed by neighborhood toughs.) Her mother was afraid to leave the house. The police were indifferent and officials callous, if not outright bigoted.

As a kid, Amethyst endured slights and insights for her background, her short height and heavy build, her decidedly unfeminine attitudes and interest. She compensated by becoming the toughest girl at school. One time a classmate called her a beamer, a strange, cartoonish slur but a slur nonetheless, just before class began. When the teacher

That earned Amethyst a suspension. After that she did her best to behave herself, at least during school hours. Though it wasn’t easy. The white kids (and even, on occasion, the tougher, bolder black kids) were more than eager to pick on her at the slightest provocation.

And the older she grew, the more she seemed to accept it.

She wore a black leather coat like a tough from West Side Story. She took to carrying a switchblade, though she rarely used it for anything more than cutting off slices of food. She did and sold drugs a few times as a teenager. She even shoplifted once or twice. Might as well play to the stereotype, since no one expected better from her.

But she wouldn’t hurt anyone. She loved her family and did her best to hide her extracurricular activities from them. She preferred pranks to violence, like the time when two menacing hoods chased her off her turf with a threat against her family. Amethyst complied, then filled their car engine with root beer and laughed at their sad attempts to start it. To her surprise and delight, they laughed off the incident themselves and made friends.

She always preferred to make people laugh than to make them bleed, however much they deserved the latter. It was her way, and it made her well-liked by the youths in her neighborhood, who called her El Payasa - the Clown. Even the adults seemed to gain a grudging respect for her. Especially when, in her late teen years, she tried taking kids under her wing and encouraging them to stay away from drugs and crime, becoming an odd sort of mentor.

The older Amethyst grew, though, the less she wanted to continue her role. She dreamed of bigger things, of making a difference outside her neighborhood. She just couldn’t figure out how.

Sometime in her early twenties she first met Pearl. Amethyst couldn’t remember how, exactly; it was a party or a dinner or some sort of gathering at a restaurant, but the details were fuzzy. She had a coworker named Maria who knew a girl Pearl knew - Rose Quartz. Amethyst had met the woman and liked her, but couldn’t claim a personal relationship. When she arrived at the restaurant and saw Pearl and Rose holding hands and laughing at each other, she quickly figured out that they were more than friends.

It was awkward at first, but Amethyst. Rose was an extremely generous woman, dressed in bohemian attire with a goofy sunhat, her curled, flowing hair and belly bouncing every time she laughed. Pearl, sitting next to her, was practically a mirror image, extreme thin and wearing a formal, light blue work shirt with her hair in a short pixie cut.

For much of the meal Amethyst felt extremely uncomfortable, out of place even. Rose was a successful businesswoman, Pearl a government employee (at the time, she didn’t specify the FBI), and the other guests were mostly artist friends from Rose’s - and all but two of them, Maria and a
black girl named Ericka, were white. Pearl looked a bit ill at ease at times when the conversation took more vulgar or political tracks, but Rose's presence ballasted her, made her feel welcome.

Amethyst, meanwhile, nibbled at her food and drank some wine and felt left out, as she always did, wondering why she was even here. She had nothing in common with these people, except their city of residence and her hatred for Richard Nixon.

"So, Amethyst." Rose's soft, heavenly voice cut into her thoughts. She looked up and saw Rose beaming at her from across the table.

"I'm sure we've met, but I can't remember where. I remember that name."

"I, uh, wait tables at a restaurant in the Bronx," Amethyst said helplessly.

"Is it El Paloma? That must be it! They have the most divine roast pork I've ever had. Pearl, we went there about a year ago, right?"

"Sounds familiar. Must have been the last time we were both in New York."

"Pearl works down in DC, so she doesn't get up here that often."

"Uh-huh." Amethyst didn't care that much at the time, though she was taken by Rose's generosity and Pearl's own striking features. She tilted her head at Amethyst like a curious bird, trying to figure her out.

"What is your dream in life?"

The question startled Amethyst. It wasn't something she'd given serious thought in a long, long time. She seemed resigned to working menial jobs in a shitty neighborhood until she got married, had kids and crapped out of life.

"I dunno, I haven't really thought about it."

"There must be something you want to do. A dream, a goal, even a fantasy."

Looking at Rose, who stared at her encouragingly, filled her with both warmth and worth. A sense that she didn't want to disappoint this woman, even though they'd only known each other for about half-an-hour. But she still didn't know what to say.

She sighed. "When I was younger, I spent a lot of time on the streets. Got into some bad scenes and hung out with the wrong people. But as I got older, I found I was better at making people feel good than committing crimes. So I kinda made myself into the neighborhood's big sister, keeping the peace and making sure no one messed with my friends while, you know, steering them in the right direction."

"That is wonderful," Rose said. Though Pearl scowled with disdain, shifting uneasily in her chair.

"Ha! The cops didn't think it was wonderful. They just saw another uppity spic with a knife who thought she owned the place. But I didn't care what they thought. I knew my neighborhood, these stupid Anglos didn't. Present company excepted."

Rose laughed. "No, not at all. Is that what made you stop?"

"Sort of. I kept getting arrested for stupid shit. Sometimes it was my fault - I did carry a switchblade or a blackjack and those aren't exactly street legal. A couple of times I got set up by people who
didn't like me - there are always those people out there. Like, some kids put a couple ounces of dope in my jacket and I get arrested for it. Only spent a few weeks in jail, but...yeah, I was lucky I got out so fast."

"I'm sure they had a good reason for arresting you," Pearl said, ever the FBI operative. Amethyst shut her down with a glare.

"So what did you do?" Rose asked, leaning forward intently, hoping to coax more out of her new acquaintance.

"Why do you want to know, man?" Amethyst complained. "This is really personal stuff."

"Because you're a fascinating woman, Amethyst," Rose said. Amethyst prepared to scoff, but she looked at Rose again and couldn't.

Something about this woman was absolutely, indescribably special. She seemed like pure Love, more than anyone Amethyst had known. And she really made Amethyst want to talk. A rarity in and of itself.

"Well, I got tired of getting nabbed for carrying weapons. And I didn't wanna carry a gun, because those things are more likely to kill someone than scare 'em straight. So I asked around, did a little research to figure out some weapon I could carry without getting in trouble."

"I see," Rose said, staring intently.

"So, I talked to one of my friends in the Bronx and he suggested...Well, actually, he made some lame-ass pun about how they needed me to whip the neighborhood into shape. So I thought about that and looked into it and I saw that there was nothing in the New York City Penal Code that prohibited me from carrying a bullwhip in public."

"Oh my word!" Pearl recoiled in horror.

"Did that work out for you?" Rose asked.

"For a little bit," she said. "I didn't like it at first because people seemed scared of me, unlike before. But it also kept the cops away from me. They wouldn't care if I had a switchblade or whatever but for some reason a whip scared 'em off. So I decided, what the hell? Better to be feared than loved, right?"

Rose showed disapproval for the first time in her conversation, while Pearl scowled. Amethyst didn't really care what she thought.

"Unfortunately there were two pricks...sorry for the language. Two upstanding young thugs, the Gomez Brothers, who came into the neighborhood from Harlem and started mugging teens. I tried having a sit down with them one day and lay things out. They mocked me and condescended to me and then threw a Molotov cocktail through the window of my house. Or thought they did, they had the wrong address and killed a sixty year old man.

"Next time I saw them, I wasn't gonna fuck around. I caught them while they were in the act of attacking Bobby Melendez, a kid I went to high school with. Then I lashed them with my whip and beat the shit out of both of 'em. Whipped them to the ground and left them raw and bleeding on the pavement. So, guess who gets in trouble when the cops showed up?"

Rose looked shocked by the story, though her face still showed more sympathy than fear. Pearl looked ready to bolt or call the police or do something.
“Did you have to go to jail?” Rose asked.

“I got put on probation,” Amethyst said. “They dropped assault charges because they knew I was protecting the kids, but I had to see a parole officer for six months.”

“That seems very generous to me,” Pearl squawked frantically.

“Sure, it was generous that I didn’t have to rot in a prison cell. Wasn’t so generous that any time I left my house I had cops follow me. Had police harass my parents and my siblings every time they went anywhere. How they would watch me intently, thinking I’m some kinda fucking troublemaker, while people were getting mugged and killed just a few yards away. That made me sick to my stomach.

“So, you ask me what do I dream?” Amethyst said. Now she developed an accusatory tone, leaning towards Rose until they were nearly face-to-face. “I dream of a world where that shit doesn’t happen. I want my neighborhood to be a better place. I want the cops to care about things other than swing their dicks around and beat up brown and black people. I want Mayor Lindsay to come down from Gracie Mansion and stick around for more than a photo op and actually do something.

“Hell, let’s go further. I want Puerto Ricans to be treated like human beings. I wish we didn’t have to leave the island to have even the tiniest sliver of a chance and that we were either independent or a state and not viewed as scummy brown nuisances to exploit or kill or leave to die when earthquakes hit and hurricanes roll. And I want to be the one who can help them do all that! But no guns, no bombs, no terrorism, no crimes, no killing, just love. Just happiness. Just, you know, being decent and right and not having to worry about any of that shit.”

And she turned the full glare of a lifetime’s resentment on Rose.

“And if you know a way I can make that happen, please, tell me.”

Suddenly, Rose reached across the table and clasped Amethyst’s wrist. At first she recoiled, feeling the moistness of Rose’s palm, but after a moment didn’t mind. Her expression instantly softened.

“That is a very worthy goal,” Rose said. “If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know.”

Amethyst smiled but didn’t know what she meant. Write her a check? Set her up with a job?

“We should all take time to fight injustice, one way or another,” Rose said, sitting back in her seat. “Whether we need to do it the right way through the System, through protests, or through...other means. I hope those other means aren’t violent. I really do. I wouldn’t dream of hurting anyone. But I hear a story like yours and I think, why can’t anything be done about all this? Why doesn’t someone care? Or maybe, why don’t the right people care?”

“Well,” she said, leaning towards Amethyst again with the same beatific smile as before, "at least now you know one person who cares!"

It would still be awhile until the Crystal Gems became a real group. But Amethyst was thoroughly bewitched by Rose Quartz. Hoping, even believing that she could do something to help, and that she would do something to change the world.

And Amethyst knew that she would help.

“I think that’s it!” Pearl said, pointing to a small hotel just off the interstate.

“Oh shit, I think I missed the exit!” Amethyst said.
"Turn down that music and pay attention to the road!" Pearl insisted.

"Nope, there it is!" Amethyst said, spotting an exit and turning the car hard to the right. The wheels screeched, car horns honked, Pearl cried out and even Garnet momentarily lost her cool as she cut across two lanes of traffic and drove to the hotel exit.

"Amethyst, you're going to get us all killed!" Pearl screamed.

"You knew the risks when you asked me to drive," she said, blowing Pearl a raspberry.

They quickly approached the hotel. And it didn't take long for the Gems to see there was trouble in the making.

"Uh, guys," Garnet said, seeing two black vans parked across from the hotel. And about a half-dozen men exiting them. Several of them carried weapons. To their surprise, a large, well-built woman stood between them, coughing into one hand and gesturing with the other.

"Looks like we got here just in time," Amethyst said quietly, parking the car around the corner. She reached for her whip and her pistol, an M1911 with an ivory handle she'd bought from Bismuth the other day.

Pearl looked terrified, but quickly forced her face into resolute mode. She sheathed her sword and pressed against the seat. Garnet loaded a shell into her shotgun.

"Ladies," she said. "We all know our rules about killing people. Ordinarily we don't do it. These shells" - she gestured at her shotgun - "have rock salt in them. But these-" and she held up another box - "are live rounds. These guys are well-armed and they're attacking targets who probably aren't. And we'll have to close in with them either very slowly or really fast. Use your own discretion about lethal force."

They slowly drove into the parking lot, parking as far away from the vans as they could. Praying that they wouldn't be noticed.

They were just about to exit their vehicle when they heard the barking of machine gun fire.

Chapter End Notes

Coding Amethyst as Latina seems pretty common among fic writers, despite her voice actress being Korean-American and the character being a purple alien. And I'll admit this was a "show off my research" kind of chapter; I read Nelson Denis's War Against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony (2015) while writing this and wanted to incorporate some of the details I learned. If I do revise this story, I'm considering changing her ethnicity to make the character seem less stereotyped.

And on that note, we'll take a break through this weekend. Thanks for reading and stay tuned to see what happens next!
The Trigger

Chapter Notes

This is a pretty short chapter for me, but it will set up the next one!

September 26, 1975

Hagerstown, MD

Peridot sat on her cot, twitching, still dressed in her rumpled work clothes. Unsure what to do, what to say, if anything.

Lapis had taken an early morning swim and still smelled vaguely of chlorine. The remaining blue streaks in her hair were now tinted a faint green. She had traded last night's dress for a dark blue pullover shirt with black jeans. Which still made her look beautiful, Peridot thought, just in a less glamorous, more approachable way.

"You don't have to stay," Lapis said, pretending to read her book again.

"I don't have anywhere else to be," Peridot insisted.

And those were just about the only words they exchanged all morning.

*What am I still doing here?* Peridot asked herself. *Why shouldn't I leave?*

Because she had sworn to protect Lapis and to help her. And some part of her, perhaps, still hoped she would testify, or at least offer secrets in some form.

But more than that. She really liked Lapis. She was an awesome person who'd been through hell and was struggling to deal with it. That much was obvious. And she didn't feel that abandoning her, whatever Lapis said, whatever dangers or uncertainties staying would bring, would be right.

Still...what exactly was their next step? Peridot hadn't seen their stalemate as a possibility. Now she had no idea.

So she sat here, waiting for some brilliant idea to bloom in her mind. Or for something to happen.

Lapis couldn't believe that Peridot was still here. After the previous night...after the way she'd cold-shouldered her? It didn't make sense.

But then, she still didn't know what to make of the weird little blonde. Who'd gone from an intrusive, nosy bureaucrat and investigator to an unwelcome guest to a reluctant informant to a friend to...whatever they were now. It was impossible to keep track.

She was smart and naive, earnest and annoying, self-assured and nervous, short but assertive. A bundle of contradictions.
And she was kinda cute, Lapis had to admit, in her own neurotic little way. But right now that wasn't her main thought.

_I wish I'd been nicer to you_, Lapis thought as she read, yet again, the same passage of _QB VII_ she'd been pretending to read for the past 12 hours. _I wish we hadn't gotten off the wrong foot. I wish we could go back to where we were last night at dinner. Being friends. Just people who liked and trusted and enjoyed each others' company._

Just... _people._

_But we won't_, Lapis thought, peering over her book as Peridot fidgeted with one of her stockings which had bunched up against her ankle. _That's just the way things are with me. I can't have friends. At least not for long._

More than anything, though, Lapis wished that she could confide her real secret to Peridot. Something she hadn't told _anyone_, and that she suspected was the real reason that Project DIAMOND was on her tail...

Then she heard a noise outside. And spotted several men briskly walking towards their hotel door. And threw her book to the floor with a heavy thud.

"You've gotta hide!" Peridot insisted, pulling Lapis off the bed and across the room.

"Hide where!?" Lapis demanded, breaking away. "Perry, think, where am I gonna...?"

Peridot felt a brief stab of happiness that they were on a first name basis again. But very brief, since the next moment could bring either of them a bullet.

"Just...I dunno, hide in the bathroom," she said, hustling Lapis along. "I'll stall them, try and convince 'em you're not here."

"You really think they're not gonna look in the bathroom?" Lapis insisted. She spotted her handgun on the night table, then broke away from Peridot and shoved it in her jeans.

"Lapis..." Peridot began.

Then the door broke down.

And standing in the doorway, flanked by two grim-looking men with Uzis, was Jasper.

Peridot gasped at her appearance. She was at least six feet tall and well-built, looking like a wrestler. Her olive skin was flecked with scars and strange, off-color patches of pigment. Her hair was long and shock white. And her eyes had a disturbing

"No..." Lapis muttered, backing away in terror.

And Jasper caught her eyesight. Her face flickered in recognition.

"You...I thought it was you when I saw your name," Jasper said, stepping over the broken door. "The sad little girl from Oxford..."

"You two know each other?" Peridot demanded. Lapis's terrified look answered.

"Tell your friend that we have important business," Jasper ordered Lapis. "Nothing to do with her."
"What are you going to do with her?" Peridot asked, struggling to maintain control of her voice.

"Just...just don't hurt her, okay?" Lapis sputtered, gesturing to Peridot and starting to step forward.

"Lapis, wait!" Peridot threw out her arms in front of Lapis. She tried to block Jasper's path, though the assassin was at least a foot taller than her, and more amused than annoyed by her defiance.

"Out of the way," Jasper warned.

"No!" Peridot said.

"You think you can stand up to me," Jasper said. "How cute. But seriously..."

"You have a lot of nerve coming here," Peridot lectured. "You should be ashamed of yourselves! You used her like some kind...some kind of...trained seal! Instead of a human being! And now you want to get rid of her for it. Shame on you."

Jasper's henchmen exchanged a wry, knowing smile at this impromptu moralizing. But Jasper just shook her head, in what seemed almost like pity.

"Your friend hasn't told you anything, has she?" she scoffed, scowling at Lapis as she spoke. "You think we would waste all this effort for a fucking informant? That's kid's stuff. Our mutual friend has a lot more to answer for than that..."

Peridot looked confused and uncertain, trying to register this information. She looked back at Lapis, whose face betrayed unfathomable shame and guilt.

"I don't care!" Peridot insisted, turning towards Lapis. "I'm not going to let you..."

Jasper struck the blonde across the face with the back of her hand. Peridot yelped with pain and fell over.

"Stop it!" Lapis shouted, kneeling down to help her friend. Peridot wiped her nose and her hand came away covered in blood.

"Perry, this doesn't concern you," Lapis pleaded.

"It does now!" Peridot shouted in fury. She wasn't going to let some clod, no matter how big or tough or intimidating, push her around like that.

Peridot leaped back to her feet and rushed towards Jasper, screaming in a blind rage...

Then one of her henchmen fired their weapon. Peridot yelped, then fell back to the ground.

Terrified, Lapis looked down at her. Thankfully, Peridot was alive, though she was clutching her left hand in agony. Jasper's men stepped forward, guns at the ready if she tried anything else.

"Enough!" Lapis shouted. "Just...leave her alone. She doesn't deserve this."

Jasper waved at her men to back off. She smiled, a vicious reptile grin that made Lapis's blood run cold.

"All right, no more games," Jasper said. She suddenly let out a deep, hacking cough, then cleared her throat. "Sorry. We have a lot of catching up to do, Ms. Lazuli...or should I say, Miss Teal."

"As long as it's quick," Lapis muttered, closing her eyes.
"That all depends on you. You see, you have more value to us than just being a loose end to tie up. You know about the Family Jewels. More important, you know where they are. So we have to have a conversation or two...or sixty...until you're ready to tell us what we need to know."

Jasper glared at Lapis for a long moment, who still seemed to be wrestling with indecision and guilt.

"And if you knew the truth about your friend," Jasper said to Peridot, still lying on the floor, "you'd be happy to see her go."

No response from Lapis, who seemed deeply lost in thought. Nor from Peridot, too preoccupied in her own injuries to follow the conversation.

"Ready?" Jasper asked, cutting into the silence.

Lapis took one last, sad look at Peridot, who was now sitting up despite her wound, her angry expression replaced with fear and despair.

"Lapis..." she managed to whisper, her eyes pleading her to stay.

"I'm sorry, Perry," Lapis said in response. She looked like the saddest woman in the world, and it broke Peridot's heart.

Then, Lapis muttered under her breath, more to herself than Peridot: "I know what I'm doing."

Taking a long, resigned sigh, she offered Jasper her right hand.

Jasper grabbed her, smirking in satisfaction and pulled her through the door. Her henchmen blocked the doorway, keeping watch on Peridot until their boss and her target were safely out of the room.

And Peridot leaned forward, reaching desperately after Lapis with her maimed hand. Then she collapsed to the floor. She was too shocked to feel pain, too sad to cry.

Back to feeling helpless. And scared. And wishing she'd stayed in Washington and been a good staffer rather than sticking her nose where it didn't belong.

But mostly, she was afraid. Because she knew something bad would happen to Lapis. And there was nothing she could do about it.

And it was at least partially her fault.

Lapis realized she didn't have much time. They had only a short distance until they reached Jasper's car. Besides Jasper, who was pulling her arm like a child, and the two gunmen flanking them, two more men were keeping watch outside the motel room, guns at the ready. Lapis saw a fifth man standing by the car, and the sixth already in the driver's seat.

"Sorry for the show," Jasper said. "But we figured that you wouldn't come quietly." She coughed again. "Goddammit, last thing I need is another summer cold..."

Lapis realized she couldn't escape. She had done one thing she'd hoped to do - save Peridot.

She remembered Jasper, from their past meetings, as a brute who took relish in inflicting pain. (Though she seemed a lot more weary and less self-assured now...maybe it was the coughing?) And, if they really planned to interrogate her, she could imagine what monstrous things Jasper had in store for her.
She had one chance. She knew she was going to die, but there was a difference between getting shot and being tortured to death.

*Better make it quick,* she told herself. *And to take at least one person with me.*

*To go out on my own terms.*

With her free hand, she fumbled into her jeans to make sure her weapon was still there. She figured they’d search her in the car, which only gave her a few seconds to act.

Jasper reached the car and tapped on the top for the door to open, stifling another cough. The gunmen spread out around her, leaving some space.

She let go of Lapis’s arm for just a moment, turning to one of her men and saying something incomprehensible.

Quickly.

At the last possible moment, Lapis reached into her jeans. Pulled out her pistol.

Pressed it directly against Jasper’s heart.

And pulled the trigger.
It happened so fast that Lapis couldn't even register it.

Just as she prepared to kill Jasper, a car driving at full speed crashed into Jasper's automobile, knocking her and Lapis to the ground. Lapis landed hard on her funny bone, causing her to drop her pistol and her arm to seize up. She heard her gun go off, knowing she couldn't have missed at point blank range...and yet Jasper seemed more startled than hurt, staggering to her feet quickly and preparing to fight.

It took Lapis a long moment to notice there was a bullet hole just beneath Jasper's left breast, blood slowing soaking through her coat. Yet she barely noticed it.

Before Lapis could react herself, a shotgun blast exploded through the air. Jasper saw the henchman nearest to her flying backwards with a thud.

Then a tall woman with the face of a secretary and the figure of a ballerina leaped onto Jasper's car, dressed in white. Wielding a large saber. With uncanny speed she slashed at two other assassins, incapacitating each one with deep, gashing blows to their shoulders.

Lapis blinked and stared at the curious vision. The woman with the saber smiled at her, her blade gleaming in the sunlight. Next to her a tall black woman with an Afro and a shotgun sauntered into view, coolly cocking her weapon.

Jasper turned to face them, hand halfway into her jacket. The henchman Garnet had shot was slowly getting to his feet, until Garnet blasted him again and he fell back down with a groan.

"There are only two ways this can end," Pearl shouted, shaking her pink-orange hair. "Either you give us Lapis peacefully or you will all end up flat on the pavement."

Jasper sniggered, examining her adversaries with disdain. "What kind of freak show is this? I've seen some weird ones in my time, but you two are the queerest ladies I've ever seen."

Pearl and Garnet exchanged a knowing smile. Lapis stared up at them in awe as she stumbled forward, feeling for her pistol on the ground.

"We're the people who give people like you nightmares," Garnet said coolly, aiming her weapon at Jasper.

"People with a conscience," Pearl announced.

"People who fight back," Garnet added.

Garnet: "We-

Pearl: "Are-"
Both: "The Crystal Gems!"

Then Amethyst ruined the heroic tableau by popping open the door to their car and tumbling to her knees.

"Just gimme a sec, guys," she moaned, staggering to her feet. "That crash was pretty..." Then she shook her hair and brandished her whip, lashing it against the ground.

"Lapis Lazuli?" Pearl asked. "Are you all right?"

"I...I think so." Lapis was still trying to take everything in. And still hoping she could find her gun.

"Good. You are coming with us."

Lapis stood up and brushed herself off, still feeling the pins and needles in her arm. She was fascinated by the Gems, but not a little terrified as she examined them.

"But...Why should I trust you?" she stepped tentatively towards Pearl.

"We're here to save you, Lapis," Garnet said. "From these hooligans."

"You're too important to let these goons hurt you," Pearl insisted.

"But what makes you think I need saving?" she asked, leaving Pearl and Garnet incredulous. They didn't really have an answer.

Jasper watched the Gems bicker and stifled a laugh, which turned into another cough.

"Looks like you tried to rescue the wrong person," she said. She snapped her fingers and her two remaining men appeared behind the car with their guns aimed at Pearl and Garnet.

"You said there were only two ways this could end," Jasper continued with a smirk as the man shot by Garnet staggered to his feet and stood beside her. "Well, I can think of at least one more..."

Jasper reached into her coat and pulled out what looked like a heavy blackjack.

"I'd consider letting you go," she continued, approaching Pearl. "But you've already made mincemeat of two of my friends, and we can't just let that go."

She saw Lapis staring at the hotel and starting to run. And grabbed her by the arm.

"And this brat is coming with me...if I have to take her as a corpse."

Pearl and Garnet exchanged concerned looks, trying not to betray fear as they contemplated their predicament. They watched Jasper pull Lapis close to her body, the young woman struggling to escape from her grip. They didn't notice Jasper's wounds until they saw her blood smeared on the back of Lapis's shirt.

Amethyst, on the other hand, wasn't intimidated. In fact, she burst out in scornful laughter.

"Oh please," Amethyst said. "We've been in far worse situations than fighting some crippled old goons in a hotel parking lot."

Jasper growled at the insults. Her henchmen cocked their weapons, aiming them at Amethyst.

Unimpressed, Amethyst pulled back her leather jacket, revealing her ivory-handled pistol in her
"If we're gonna get nasty, let's get **nasty**," she said, an evil glint in her eye. "You motherfuckers don't stand a chance against us."

Then she leaned forward and lashed her whip against the ground again, daring Jasper or one of the goons to make their move.

"Enough talk," Jasper said. She threw Lapis against the car door, hitting her head on the side panel. Lapis sunk to the ground with a loud moan. Then she brandished her blackjack and made for Pearl, striking at her leg.

Pearl casually moved her leg out of the way, then leaped off the car. With amazing precision she slashed her sword and caught Jasper on the back of her shoulder as she bounded over her. It was a glancing blow, but enough to throw the thug off-balance. Jasper turned and faced Pearl again, who stood with her saber en garde, daring Jasper to attack.

"All right, we're gonna do that, huh?" Jasper said, taking off her coat. "It's gonna take more than some fancy foot work to beat me!"

Again she lunged at Pearl with her blackjack, who easily sidestepped her. But Jasper, with astonishing speed, managing to land a blow to Pearl's stomach with her left fist, sending her reeling backwards, gasping for air. She barely had time to react, dropping to one kneel and parrying a blow from Jasper's blackjack with the hilt of her sword.

Pearl regained her footing and she and Jasper smashed their weapons together. Pearl assumed that Jasper had an iron rod or something of similar weight inside her blackjack, hoping that her sword would be strong enough to withstand these blows.

As they moved, the others remained frozen for a moment watching them clash. Then Amethyst, naturally enough, broke the spell by raising her whip and striking the goon closest to Garnet, knocking him to the ground. Garnet nodded and aimed her shotgun, firing another rock salt shell into the second thug next to her at point blank range. He collapsed with a groan.

The third goon, having already suffered two hits from Garnet's weapon, threw his hands up in the air when Amethyst and Garent faced him, whimpering in fear. Neither of them wanted to hurt a man so clearly scared, but they couldn't take the chance that he'd recover his courage...

Then a shot rang out, and he fell to the ground bleeding from his hip. Amethyst turned and saw Lapis laying next to the car, having shot him with her handgun. Apparently expended from the effort, her head still spinning from the blow, she collapsed to the pavement.

The two other men closest to Garnet started to rise again, until Garnet and Amethyst turned and faced them down. They sunk back to the ground in sheer terror, causing Amethyst to chuckle.

But the situation with Pearl and Jasper was deadly serious. Somehow Jasper, despite having a smaller and heavier weapon, was managing to parry Pearl's expert swordsmanship. She didn't have the Gem's nimble footwork, but her formidable build and quick reflexes made it hard for Pearl to land a blow. It seemed that victory would go to whichever of them tired first. Unless one of Pearl's friends stepped in.

"Pearl!" Garnet cried, taking a step forward with her shotgun at the ready.

"Go rescue Peridot," Pearl said, swiping for Jasper's head and missing as the villain ducked.
"You sure you got this, P?" Amethyst asked, whip at the ready.

"Don't worry about me," she said, dodging another sledgehammer blow from Jasper, then kicking her in the gut. "I'm perfectly capable of handling this..."

And she struck her saber as hard she could. Jasper managed to block it with her blackjack, the impact of metal on metal causing Pearl to lose her grip on the sword. Jasper took advantage of this by striking Pearl in the stomache again, and she reeled backwards. Jasper, now bleeding profusely, dragged herself to her feet and prepared to deal Pearl a more serious blow.

Then Amethyst's whip lashed against Jasper's back. Groaning in anger, Jasper turned and grabbed Amethyst's whip, pulling her to the ground. She then elbowed Amethyst in the face, causing her nose to bleed. Amethyst responded by grabbing the larger woman's arm and biting her wrist.

"Garnet," Amethyst cried, her head gesturing towards the hotel room. Garnet nodded and tucked her shotgun under one arm, moving as fast as she could.

Jasper struck Amethyst on the shoulder again, causing her to cry out in pain. Then she felt someone gently poking her back.

Breathing heavily, she turned and saw Pearl standing over her with her saber reclined into a seconde position. A confident, mocking smirk crept on the taller woman's face as Jasper examined her.

"Excuse me, I don't believe we're finished," Pearl said with mocking calm. Then she whipped her sword around with a flourish, moving it into a parry, and back up several steps, daring Jasper to attack her.

Jasper roughly threw Amethyst to the pavement and moved towards Pearl, ready to continue their fight.

Peridot was still sitting on the hotel floor, bleeding from her wrist wound. Listening to the gunfire and chaos outside. It made her sick to her stomach, yet she was too terrified to look and see what was going on. Too afraid at what might happen to Lapis. Let alone her.

She wasn't any less terrified when Garnet first appeared in the doorway, her hair wild and coat a mess, her shotgun poorly concealed on her left arm. She offered the young aide an arm, but Peridot didn't move.

"You're Peridot, right?" Garnet said.

Peridot just nodded.

"Right. Come with me."

Peridot accepted and raised herself up, smarting. Garnet took a look at her injury and examined it closely. Determining it wasn't life-threatening, she pulled Peridot close.

"No one's going to hurt you," Garnet promised. "We'll make sure of that."

Peridot could only nod again.

"Follow me."

And Garnet rushed back outside. Peridot, wondering what the hell she was doing, followed after her.
As they stepped out, a man brandishing a gun appeared to their left. Instinctively, Garnet stopped, turned on her heel and fired a shotgun blast, sending the man sprawling to the ground. Peridot stared open-mouthed, until Garnet pulled on her arm, convincing her to run back.

Peridot looked back and saw the man groaning and twitching on the ground, but apparently, miraculously unhurt. Then she saw a flashy reflection off the man's chest.

It was some kind of badge.

Peridot kept running. And prayed to God that Garnet hadn't just shot a police officer.

After several minutes of trading blows, Pearl and Jasper were now circling around each other, panting and sweating. The adrenaline high was wearing off, and both women were giving into their injuries. Pearl felt her stomach starting to knot up and bruise where Jasper had punched her. And Jasper's chest wound bled more and more heavily with each passing heartbeat.

Pearl raised herself up, flipping a strand of sweaty hair off her forehead, her sword raised towards Jasper. She started to say something, but couldn't muster the breath to say it, and panted instead. Jasper let out a loud, phlegmy cough and staggered forward, looking like a punch-drunk fighter who should have thrown in the towel three rounds ago.

Out of the corner of her eye, Pearl saw Garnet and Peridot coming towards them. Looking away for the slightest moment cost her. Because Jasper leaned forward and smashed Pearl's left shoulder with her blackjack.

Pearl let out a fierce cry of pain and reeled backwards. She still had enough strength in her right arm to parry another blow, but struggled to maintain her balance as she moved backwards. The pain was unbearable and her exhaustion and dizziness started catching up to her.

"Your moves are nice and fancy," Jasper said, aiming another blow at Pearl, this time missing by a mile. Pearl sidestepped it and held her sword close as she backed away, trying to ignore the pain.

"But I'm a street fighter," Jasper boasted wheezily. She made another, even more desperate attempt to strike Pearl. "It's gonna take more than some dainty dance moves to take me down." She spit a thick gob of bloody saliva on the ground, then bent down for a long moment trying to catch her breath.

Pearl saw that Jasper was slipping, her steps turning into a heavy stagger, her blows growing more feeble. She just had to keep her balance long enough, avoid her last frantic blows, and Jasper would exhaust herself. She was clearly more badly hurt than Pearl was, and all the adrenaline in the world can't heal blood loss and tissue damage.

But Pearl's left shoulder was so painful, and now starting to swell, that she could barely hold up her sword. So she kept backing away, relying on her legs to keep her upright.

"Had enough?" Jasper grunted, stepping forward with a heavy wheeze. Pearl didn't even bother to move this time. Mistake.

Because Jasper mustered enough energy to swing her blackjack at Pearl again. Hit her sword on the blade, just above the hilt. Pearl cried out and lost her grip, letting her weapon fly onto the pavement. She was now completely vulnerable, and Pearl feared she didn't have enough strength or energy left to dodge any blows.

Jasper took two more lurching steps forward, a triumphant grin on her face, blackjack at the ready.
Then her breathing slowed and she collapsed, eyes rolling up into her head as she fell heavily to the ground.

"Pearl?" a familiar voice cried out. Pearl raised herself off the ground, using the blade as leverage, and saw Peridot, staring at her in awe and admiration.

Pearl again wiped away some hair from her face and smiled. "Ms. Khoury," she said. "How pleasant to see you again."

Then she noticed Peridot's injured hand, and her smile faded.

"Looks like... it's been a hard day for... both of us..." she managed to say, before bending over and vomiting.

"No time for pleasantries," Garnet barked, helping Amethyst to her feet. "We have to get out of here, now. All three of you hurt..."

"I've had worse," Amethyst insisted. "Mostly I'm dizzy from, you know..." And she gestured at their car.

"All three of you are hurt," Garnet continued, "and Lapis..."

Lapis lie on the ground half-conscious, her head raised up. Peridot noticed her and ran over.

"Lapis, oh my God! Are you all right?"

"Perry..." she said quietly, recognizing her friend and smiling. "Thank God..."

"Thank God you're all right!" Peridot said.

"Lapis did fine," Garnet said tersely. She helped Peridot lift the stricken young woman to her feet and carry her towards their car.

As they did, Garnet saw the two henchmen behind Jasper's car raise themselves up again, both aiming their guns. Peridot squeaked in terror and winced, trying to shield Lapis.

Garnet let go of Lapis, whipped out her shotgun and blasted her remaining rock salt shells into them, knocking both back to the ground. Aside from some quiet groans, they were silent.

She pumped her weapon and inserted another round. "This one's live," Garnet said.

With Jasper apparently dead and her henchmen too exhausted and injured to move, Garnet helped everyone pile into the Gems' car. Its front end was badly smashed from the collision, but the engine still ran.

"Amethyst, are you up for driving?" she asked.

"Pretty sure I have a concussion," Amethyst grumbled, holding her head. "But sure, I'll give it a shot."

"Let me," Pearl said.

"You're hurt, Pearl," Garnet insisted. "I'll drive."

By now, a few hotel occupants had appeared and started gathering at the far end of the parking lot,
watching the strange, violent scene before them. Peridot felt a lurch of nervousness, but the Gems did their best to ignore their audience.

"Let's get going," Garnet said, helping her friend into the car. And Peridot stared back at the crowd in terror one last time, wondering if her chance a normal life had vanished.

Then she looked at Lapis, groaning and resting her head on the car door inside, and realized she no longer cared.

By the time police arrived, the Gems were long gone. Instead, there was a curious crowd, now more interested in scared, a shattered Lincoln and five badly battered men bleeding on the ground.

Jasper was nowhere to be seen.

As soon as the Gems were out of sight, she managed to drag herself off the ground and into a patch of bushes. She listened for the sirens and rolled out of sight, praying that she wouldn't leave a conspicuous blood trail.

She was bleeding heavily, and her muscles throbbed from the effort of fighting Pearl. Yet somehow, she wasn't dead.

At this moment, the only thoughts she could spare between flashes of agony were avenging herself on the so-called Crystal Gems. Breaking each of their necks with her bare hands, preferably. Not to mention doing unspeakable things to Lapis Lazuli.

Except, every time she tried to stand up, she collapsed to the ground in a heap of pain. And the sounds of policemen surveying the parking lot convinced her it was best.

Soon, she promised herself despite the pain and the blood coursing through her, I'll get another chance. This was just round one.

Then she blacked out.
September 27, 1975

Beach City, DV

"Ronaldo, you're full of shit."

"Come on Jamie, use your God-given noggin! Two attempts on the President's life within two weeks! Just as the Senate's starting to investigate assassinations on live television! You can't tell me that's a coincidence."

"I'm telling you that it's a reach. Why would the CIA want to kill frigging Gerald Ford, of all people? He was on the Warren Commission, for God's sakes!"

"That's just it...they weren't trying to kill him. It's a false flag. Justify cracking down dissidents and everyone with independent thought. You really think two crazy ladies who don't know how to use a gun would both act? I mean, one would be suspicious enough..."

"You are completely full of it, Ronaldo!"

"Open your eyes, man! This whole country has gone insane, and assassinations are just the tip of the iceberg..."

Greg Universe rolled his eyes warily as the conversation raged on around him. His friends Ronaldo and Jamie couldn't stop connecting dots of every little thing that happened in the world, trying to fashion.

All Greg wanted that night was to eat his pizza.

He didn't like to spend any more time in Beach City than he had to. At least not since Rose passed away. But he'd gotten a phone call from Jamie, the town mail carrier and occasional thespian, pitching him a movie project - "It'll be like Easy Rider, but with sea monsters!" - for which Greg would provide the music, and possibly an acting appearance. But it was clear that he and Ronaldo, local kook, hadn't hashed the idea out beyond that basic concept.

Except now, the two nitwits were at each other's throats, arguing about Gerald Ford and Squeaky Fromme and all the rest. And Greg just didn't care.

Same old song and dance. He'd had more than his fill of this conspiracy nonsense. Some things were just people being crazy or stupid. And frankly, he was tired of hearing about it all.

"Come on guys," he said, "this is the reason I don't watch television any more! Can't we just talk shop or something?"

"I wish we could talk shop," Ronaldo said, the veins in his head practically throbbing. "That's exactly what the Illuminati and the Trilateral Commission would have us do..."

"Jesus Christ, dude..." Greg muttered as Ronaldo chattered on, oblivious to his discomfort. Clearly nothing productive was coming out of tonight.
"Yeah, Ronaldo's been...well, he's always been a little out there," Jamie said afterwards, walking down the boardwalk as the sun dipped below the horizon. "But lately...man, since Nixon resigned he's been completely out of it."

It was the end of summer tourist season, and so only a few scattered locals graced the pier that Saturday night, mostly looking for food. As were the seagulls which circled overhead.

"Not everything is a conspiracy," Greg said. "But I don't know how to get through to that guy..."

"I stopped trying a long time ago," Jamie sighed. He stopped and looked out at the waves crashing peacefully over the beach. Greg joined him, and for a long moment the two of them were silent.

"Can't believe it's been so long," Greg said.

"Almost five years," Jamie answered. He put a hand on Greg's shoulder.

"You all right, man? I didn't wanna drag you back here, but..."

"Nah, it's cool," Greg lied, more than a little irritated that the promised film project wasn't actually there. "I need a break from the rat race anyway."

"Bet you've had some great concerts."

"Well, the concert part is right," Greg huffed. "Big? I played a little show in Wilmington two weeks ago that had about fifty people."

"Sorry, man."

"Hey, I'm a late '60s folk guy in a '70s disco world," he muttered. "Some things can't last forever. I mean, even the Beatles broke up."

Jamie smiled wistfully and looked at Greg, who tried slicking back his long, messy hair, lost in thought.

"Hey listen, man," Jamie said. "If you need a place to crash...I mean, there's no reason you have to be alone..."

"That's all right," Greg said. "I'll go to Rose's place. Still have the key."

Deadly pause.

"I'd, um, thought you'd wanna stay away from that place," Jamie said in disbelief. "I mean, for more than one reason..."

Greg shrugged. "It's not often you got to sleep in a four-bedroom beach house," he said, kicking a cigarette butt onto the beach below. "Especially when you're living out of a van for months..."

"Fair enough." Jamie clasped Greg's arm and the two hugged each other.

"We'll talk business tomorrow," Jamie assured him. "You and me. Ronaldo, fuck him. He needs to get his head out of the clouds."

"At this point I'd just as soon skip business and just do some guy stuff, you know?"

"Any idea where you're headed next?"
"Dunno, maybe Richmond. I have some friends down there I wanna catch up with."

"Vidalia and Marty?"

"Half-right. Vidalia and Marty aren't a couple any more."

"Aw man, what happened?"

"Simple, Marty is a piece of shit. Got Vidalia pregnant and traded her in for another girl who wasn't. Haven't seen him in a few months, which is great because I'd take a swing at him and break his fucking face if I ever saw him again."

"Jeez man, that's shitty of him."

"Well, Vidalia took it better than I'd have thought. Seemed happy to be rid of the dirt bag, really. Anyway, she's working down at Virginia Beach now selling T-shirts or something. Not much but hey, you gotta grow up at some point, right? Think she's dating a sailor..."

"Well, I won't keep you any longer," Jamie said. "Just gimme a call tomorrow morning and we'll get breakfast or something."

"Sure thing, pal," Greg said, forcing a smile on his face as they parted ways. He climbed down the ladder to the beach, pushed through some reeds and walked along the beach, watching the Moon rise over the ocean.

He walked on, past the docks and the amusement park, until the pier lights were a smudge and the music and conversation a dim blur. Somewhere he could be alone with his thoughts. As unpretty as those thoughts were.

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No matter what he did, Greg couldn't get that night out of his mind. It was the most terrifying thing he'd ever experienced.

"Rose...Rose! Please tell me you weren't...My God, I told you stay off that stuff!"

Rose had already passed out when Greg found her on the beach. She was laying in the surf, the water splashing under her dress. Her face was turning blue.

"Dear God, Rose...Please! Be okay!"

Helplessly, he felt for a pulse. There was one, very faint but extremely fast. Her breathing was irregular. And he figured being out here on a cold

"Somebody call a doctor! Anybody, help!"

But they were alone on the beach with some crabs and a dying marlin. It was a nightmare.

Greg tried to do CPR, tried desperately to resuscitate his partner. But it didn't seem to accomplish anything. Rose never regained consciousness, and Greg's grief overcame his efforts at helping.

"Rose, please," Greg pleaded through his tears. "You can't do this to me! How are we gonna have kids and start our business in town?"

Rose, of course, couldn't answer. Her head rested atop her messy, pinkish-red locks in the sand.

Greg pumped her chest and breathed another dose of oxygen into her mouth. Nothing.
She wouldn't respond. But she was still alive.

Which made Greg try harder.

After several minutes he was too exhausted to continue. He ran out of breath and collapsed on the sand beside her. He saw Rose's chest heave once or twice, her hand twitch, but nothing more.

As the surf crashed in around them, Greg broke down crying.

It took Greg about 20 minutes to reach Rose's old beach house, built on a cliff side. He'd parked his van surreptitiously on the beach below, as if he'd planned to camp there. He walked up the ladder to the porch, then reached for his key. It still fit in the lock.

He turned on the light, mostly amazed to find that there was still electricity running. Then he remembered that Rose and he had installed some kind of generator years ago.

Oh, and that the place...wasn't exactly deserted.

From what Jamie told him, a wealthy couple had purchased the beach house since Rose's death. They lived there off and on, but had left on a long vacation to Europe a few months ago, with no indication that they'd ever be coming back.

So, all right, technically Greg was squatting or breaking-and-entering or whatever the law's strict terminology called what he was doing. But he doubted anyone would mind. He could stay here for a night and no one would know, or care, except Jamie.

The place looked pretty spiffy, if remarkably different from how Rose had kept it. Each bedroom had its own queen-sized mattress, the living room was furnished with a television and a large house. There was a large master bathroom in the front and a small water closet with a toilet between the master bedroom and the next one over.

He'd always wondered how Rose could have afforded such a place. She ran a small seamstress store up in New York and occasionally visited Washington on other business. She wasn't exactly a millionaire. Right now, though, he was mostly grateful that she had come by it, however she did.

He went to the restroom and, after relieving himself, he washed up in the sink. And found a small piece of paper sticking out of the mirror.

Greg's eyes goggled. It was still there.

Still there...All these years later.

A note that Greg had found a few nights before Rose's death.

And for some reason, the current occupants had left it there. Or else not noticed it. But how could they not?

Greg opened the note and read it for what must have been the eight hundredth time:

Dearest Greg,

Just wanted to tell you you're the most wonderful person in the world. I have met and loved many people in my life and I can't think of anyone that makes me feel the way you do. Whatever happens to me, that will never change. Please don't forget that.
Love,

Rose

Whatever happens...

Another piece of the puzzle. Another that left Greg wondering if Rose committed suicide or died accidentally or if something else was afoot. Or maybe it was just a banal love note. Rose did like to express her affection for Greg on the slightest pretense.

Greg started to crumple the note up, wanting to have done with it. But he didn't have the heart. So he just stuck it behind the mirror and went about his business.

He went to the kitchen and saw that the fridge was well-stocked. Saw a six pack of lager and thought about grabbing a can, but managed to control himself.

*You're eight months sober, idiot,* he thought. *Don't let that rock head Ronaldo f**k this up for you.*

So he poured himself a glass of chocolate milk instead. Then sat on the couch and sighed heavily, taking in the house and all its memories.

Until he heard the sound of a speeding car outside.

"Greg, we weren't expecting you here," Garnet said tersely. "We need the beach house."

"Sure..." Greg was utterly confused, not expecting company...especially *this* company. He knew when the Gems showed up uninvited, it usually spelled trouble.

"Do you have accommodations for five people?" Garnet asked, examining the domicile.

"Well, I'm still kinda settling in myself..."

"Greg, we wouldn't impose on you like this if things weren't serious," Garnet said, putting a hand on his shoulder and shooting him a stern glare. Greg looked around, watching the rest of the team file into the beach house.

"I mean, you're all here," Greg sighed. "So, no sense in throwing you all out."

"Thanks, Greg," Garnet smiled. "You've always been a good friend."

*Some friend,* Greg thought, a little bewildered at the interlopers.

He didn't recognize two of them - the youngest girls. A tall, thin girl with black hair and olive skin, who wandered around as if in a daze, looking like she hadn't slept in days. Maybe she hadn't. Another girl, short and blonde and chattering in a nasal voice, her hand bandaged, darted eagerly from room to room, checking the place out.

Then came Pearl, still wearing her fencing outfit, coated in sweat and blood though it was, with a heavy bandage visible on her shoulder. She walked a bit uneasily, struggling with the pain. But bolted upright when she and Greg locked eyes.

"Pearl," Greg said, surprised and a bit wary.

Pearl gasped and blushed. "Come on Peridot, it looks like you need to wash that hand again," she said.
"But it stopped bleeding yesterday..." Peridot insisted. Pearl didn’t listen to her, eager to exit the room.

Greg scratched his head and sighed. "We're still doing this, huh?" he muttered, disappointed that he and Pearl still couldn't work things out.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and someone flicked his nose.

"Man, I can't believe you fall for that every. Fucking. Time!" Amethyst laughed and slapped Greg on the back.

"Amethyst! Aren't you a sight for sore eyes!" He hugged her tightly.

"And some other things," she said suggestively. Though she cried out when he pressed on her injured shoulder.

"Sorry, it's just...been so long since I've seen you guys! I assume you're still fighting crime and corruption and all that biz."

"You know it!" Amethyst said, looking around the beach house. "Hey, it looks like you did a great job spiffing up the place!"

"Well actually..." Greg wasn't sure he wanted to explain the truth. And Garnet laid her shotgun down on the kitchen table.

"Oh...that kinda trouble," Greg muttered, wincing at the sight of the weapon.

"No worries, Greg," Garnet assured him. "There shouldn't be any violence. And if there is, we'll be sure to leave you out of it."

"Well, that's a relief," he said, though he wasn't entirely reassured by this.

"Guess I could sleep in the van?" he offered lamely, though he didn't relish the idea.

"No, Greg, you were here first," Garnet assured him. "Besides, I won't be doing any sleeping tonight," she said, gesturing towards her weapon.

"I don't mind crashing on the couch," Amethyst offered.

"Meh, it's okay, Amethyst. You look like you need it more than I do."

"You sure?" Amethyst said tenderly. Then she segued back into teasing. "Of course, if you don't mind a little company..."

"Jeez Amethyst, let's not do this," he said, a little irritated given the circumstances, and unsure as usual how serious she was.

"Sorry dude, I gotta be me," she said, laughing as she slapped him on the back. "But seriously, if you want the bed..."

"Take it," he said, waving his hand like he didn't want to talk about it any more.

"Thank you, Greg," Garnet said. "I'm really sorry about all this, but..."

"No worries, Garnet," Greg said, regaining his affability. "I mean, I don't know if I could have spent a night here alone, anyway. Besides...maybe it'll be nice to catch up with old friends."
"Oh, come on!" Amethyst yelled from another room. "Greg, why isn't the fucking television working!"

Greg sighed again and sunk down on the couch. Whatever else happened, this was going to be a long weekend...

Lapis collapsed into the master bed, not caring any more if there was a danger of her concussion causing death, and fell asleep immediately. She hadn't slept in two days and staying awake was not an option.

Peridot, too shy to join her but unwilling to press her luck, snatched a spare pillow and slept on the floor at the foot of the bed, wondering at the mess she'd gotten herself into.

Amethyst stayed awake for awhile, trying to get the television to work (mostly by smashing it with her fist) before belatedly accepting that it wasn't worth it. Then she made her way to the kitchen and made herself a big bowl of snacks to munch on, along with several beers. To the consternation of Greg, who tossed and turned on the couch, trying to block out the popping cans and chewing noises with the couch pillows.

In the room next to Lapis and Peridot, Pearl sat on the edge of her bed, slowly, gingerly removing her outfit. Besides her shoulder, her stomach was wrapped in a compress, with Jasper's fists turning her midriff into one big, brownish-purple bruise. She ached from her injuries and exhaustion, wondering if she'd ever be able to stand up again should she lay down. Wondering if she could be here, of all places, without losing it.

Greg being here was an unexpected irritant. The cherry on the shit sundae, as Amethyst might say. But they'd been able to tolerate each others' presence before, even since Rose's death. And her other circumstances were so bad that really, she couldn't worry about it.

She did, however, have a small memento - her favorite cameo portrait of Rose. Which she put on a nightstand and stared at admiringly, tears brimming in her eyes.

More than anything, though, she needed a hot shower. And sleep.

As the sun finished sinking, Garnet stood watch outside, sitting on the porch with her shotgun in her lap.

Below them, the crashing waves echoed against the shore.

Chapter End Notes

I feel really bad about writing Steven out of this AU, but I couldn't find a way to fit him into this story. Mea culpa!
Damage

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Master of the Boot and gaytriangle for your reviews! And thanks for everyone who's reading, following and offering kudos! You guys make writing worthwhile and I deeply appreciate your kind words.

September 28, 1975

Beach City, DV

The first day in Beach City was a Sunday. Lapis woke up late, sleeping in even after Peridot had gone downstairs to grab some food.

She lay in bed for awhile, staring at the ceiling, taking in her new surroundings. Trying to make sense of the past few days' blur of events, and the weird acquaintances she'd just made. And feeling deeply miserable, alone and empty.

As usual.

Perhaps that's why she decided it was time to hold Mass.

She sneaked around the house, trying not to draw anyone's attention. Pearl, Garnet and Greg were all outside, examining the Gems' beat-up car. Amethyst appeared to be in the bathroom. There was no sign of Peridot, who until now had practically refused to leave her side, and Lapis couldn't help wondering where she'd gone. But only for a moment.

She rummaged through a cupboard and found a few old candles. And a book of matches. Not much, but better than nothing.

There wasn't a crucifix in the house, let alone any kind of formal altar or sacraments, so she decided to draw a cross on a piece of paper and tack it to her wall. Then arrayed about a half-dozen candles underneath. It seemed silly, but the symbolism was the same to Lapis whether it was a drawing or a huge piece of wood.

Lapis felt deeply odd whenever she thought about religion. Her church had caused her more guilt and torment than comfort and belonging, and she had every reason to scorn it. Certainly, on a day-to-day basis, she didn't think about God - considered herself an atheist, or at least someone who didn't care.

But she felt so empty right now, and so dislocated in this weird new place surrounded by strange, not necessarily friendly people (Peridot, perhaps, excepted). She needed something to keep her mind straight.

She heard the gurgle of a flushing toilet. And saw Amethyst walking past.

"Morning, Lapis," she said casually. Then she stopped when she spotted the candles, and Lapis kneeling down to light them.
"Whoa, what's this?" Amethyst asked, raising an eyebrow. "You holding some kinda mass?"

"Oh...well, yeah," Lapis said, fussing with a match. "I mean, it is Sunday after all."

"Should have figured you were a Catholic," Amethyst teased. "I mean, with the whole guilt complex thing you've got going on."

Lapis giggled quietly. "Well, this is more out of habit than anything," she said. "I don't even usually go to church, but sometimes..."

"Yeah, I feel you," Amethyst admitted, moving next to Amethyst. "Never really liked going to church, either. Felt like one more obligation on top of a million others, like I needed that. Plus my parents were kinda obnoxious about the whole religion thing."

Lapis laughed, a little louder this time. "Well, my family's Italian, and I grew up in a town where that was enough to make you an outsider. Let alone everything else about me..."

"Ha, yeah. Still," Amethyst admitted sheepishly, "sometimes I do need to feel like I belong to something bigger than me. Kinda shitty to think that this is all there is to my life, you know? Or that I have no consequence. Maybe that's why I joined Pearl and Garnet."

She left the last comment hanging there, part observation, part invitation. Lapis smiled and nodded inscrutably, then lit another candle.

Amethyst still didn't know what to make of their new acquaintance. She was shy, she'd barely said any words to them since their first meeting, she seemed so fragile and broken inside that it hurt. Yet, as she'd demonstrated in the scuffle the other day, she clearly wasn't a pushover. Maybe she was a friend worth having.

At the very least, she seemed like someone worth protecting. A good person who'd been hurt and betrayed by their government. Exactly what the Crystal Gems had been formed to protect.

"Is it, uh, alright if I join you?" Amethyst asked sheepishly.

"Um, sure," Lapis said, a bit surprised. "I'm just gonna kneel here and say a few prayers, I guess. Nothing formal or anything."

"Oh yeah, I'm all about formality," Amethyst joked. Then she crossed herself and knelt down next to Lapis, just as she lit the last candles.

"Uh, morning Lapis," Peridot called from the doorway.

"Peridot, you're here!" Lapis called, her voice seeming genuinely cheerful. "Was wondering where you'd gotten to?"

"I just wanted to take a walk," Peridot said. "The beach is lovely this time of year. Plus, I didn't want to wake you up."

"No sweat," Lapis assured her.

"Hey Perry," Amethyst called.

"Umm...what is this?" Peridot asked, examining the altar.

"We're getting ready to hold Mass," Lapis said. "Or something!"
"Oh, um...great." Peridot shifted her feet and looked away. Religious talk always made her uncomfortable.

"Why don't you join us, Perry?" Amethyst asked. "Won't take more than a few minutes.'

"That's all right," Peridot said. "Don't wanna get in your way..."

"Is it because you're not Catholic?" Amethyst asked her. "Don't matter to me.

"This mass is non-denominational," Lapis assured Peridot.

"My family is Maronite, which is a kind of Catholic," Peridot said. "Of course, the Pope wouldn't like me to say as much..."

"Well, I don't wanna make you do anything that makes you uncomfortable," Lapis said, though her eyes suggested she was a little disappointed. "Just thought it would be nice."

Peridot smiled sadly. Torn because she really didn't want to disappoint Lapis, because this seemed a good opportunity to get closer to her, but she also didn't want to discuss or take part in anything religious. She had never really connected with her faith, and really wondered how Lapis could after everything she'd been through. After how much her religion must have torn at and castigated her just for the fact that she was wired differently than others.

Well, people are messed up, Peridot concluded. Lapis, maybe more than others.

"That's okay," Peridot said, wrestling with the most tactful way to say it. She decided on bluntness: "It's not really my thing."

"Oh," Lapis muttered. She looked down at the floor, clearly crushed that she couldn't share her faith with her friend. It broke Peridot's heart, but she didn't want to be compelled to do something she didn't believe in, either.

"Hey, no big deal, Perry," Amethyst assured her. "Not like Pearl or Garnet are into this, either. We'll catch up later. This should only take a few minutes."

"All right," Peridot said, hurrying out of the room. She didn't want to cause any more awkwardness or distress just by being present.

After she left, Lapis and Amethyst knelt awkwardly together in silent prayer. Amethyst bowed her head almost to the floor, while Lapis sat up properly, hands clasped together like a girl in Sunday school.

She hoped that her formality would hide her disappointment with Peridot. But a single tear ran down her cheek as she muttered "Amen."

Pearl lowered the hood of the car gently, like she was closing a coffin lid. Or maybe it just hurt too much for her to use force.

"What's the verdict?" Garnet asked.

"Well, it's certainly not looking good," Pearl said, wiping her brow. "The exterior damage is obvious," she declared, waving her hand at the crushed front of the car, the destroyed grill and the twisted bumper and the smashed headlight. "But it looks like the collision damaged the engine block and the radiator. Frankly, I'm amazed that we made it all the way here from DC without the car
exploding."

"Yeah, you really did a number on it," Greg said, whistling in disbelief. "Plus, it looks like you somehow messed up the front axle..."

"It's always been like that," Pearl insisted.

"Umm, then why didn't you fix it?" Greg asked. "I know you're pretty good with cars, Pearl..."

"There are bigger concerns," Garnet said.

"Plus we don't have the money to get a new axle," Pearl said, seeming oddly defensive.

"Well, it's your car." Greg scratched his head. "Or it was..."

"We're gonna have to think about this," Garnet said. "We don't really have enough money for more than the bare necessities right now, certainly not enough to buy a new car."

"Maybe you could, I dunno, steal one?" Greg suggested. Pearl and Garnet both shot him an angry glare.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I just thought..."

"Just because we're outside the law doesn't mean we're criminals, Greg," Pearl snapped. Her voice came out more strangled and painful than usual.

"Actually, that's kinda exactly what it means..."

Garnet sensed that Pearl and Greg were about to go at it again, like they had a million times before. She decided to swallow her disgust and step in.

*Time for me to play the peacemaker,* she told herself, gritting her teeth. *Like always.*

"Greg, what Pearl means is that we don't commit crimes for the sake of committing crimes," Garnet explained patiently.

She started to say more, until Pearl stormed off huffing. Greg sighed sadly.

"Nothing's ever gonna fix this, is it?" he said, slinking back towards his van.

Garnet shook her head. She resented having to be the levelheaded one, the responsible one, the one who sorted everything out. She had enough of that teaching kids; she shouldn't need to do that with adults, especially adults doing such serious work. But if no one else would...

"Greg, wait," Garnet said, stopping him.

"She still blames me for Rose, doesn't she?" Greg said, looking tired and defeated. "Well, I don't blame her. A lot of times I blame myself for not being able to stop it or not seeing it coming. But still...it hurts, you know? I like to think I'm a nice guy, and it kills me to think that...maybe I'm not."

"You are a nice guy, Greg," Garnet said sincerely. "You've helped us many times in the past when you had no reason to. You've been a friend who's put up with a lot of garbage from us...like, I dunno, our ruining your vacation with impromptu visits."

Garnet smiled, and Greg followed suit.
"This isn't exactly the first time it's happened," he said.

"I can talk to Pearl, if you like," Garnet offered. "If not for you, then for the rest of us."

"I dunno," Greg said. "Might make it worse."

"Won't know until we try."

"I don't really need her to like me," Greg said. "She's never gonna forgive me for Rose, one way or the other. I know that. I just wish we could be in the same state without, you know, a wall of ice descending between us. I feel bad enough about Rose without..."

And he trailed off, lowering his head in shame. Garnet put a hand on his shoulder and smiled warmly.

"I'll do my best to break that wall," Garnet promised. Greg looked over and saw Pearl carrying her saber onto an empty part of the beach.

"Easier said than done," Greg warned. "Anyway, I'm gonna be in my van. Have a few new tunes I'm trying out..."

"Hope we get to hear 'em later," Garnet said with a wink. Then she left Greg and took after Pearl.

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To Pearl's chagrin, her body was still a wreck. No matter how lightly she held the sword, no matter what position she took, it caused stabbing pains to shoot through her left shoulder. Jasper had really done a number on her, whether or not she admitted it.

Her stomach seemed even worse. The blows from Jasper made it hard for her even to sit up or stand for a long period of time, let alone sword fight. The bruises had started to fade, but the skin and muscles were still swollen and tender. Pearl worried that she might have some kind of organ damage or worse. But it wasn't like she could walk into a hospital and ask for help.

Still, she knew (like everyone else did) that they wouldn't have long to rest. They were always fighting enemies with more manpower and resources than them. And she figured it would be easy enough to track them down to Beach City, given the group's history there. And that Peridot, too, came from this area.

So Pearl tried to make sure she could fight. She was able to do some basic fencing moves without difficulty, but she was too stiff and sore to thrust and slash without causing serious pain in her arms and abdomen. Still, she kept going, gritting her teeth and forcing herself to keep thrusting at imaginary enemies until she was able to comfortably balance her sword.

Then she thought about Greg again, and Rose. And Garnet, acting like she needed to interpret her words and emotions for others. And felt a strong surge of irrational anger flooded through her.

She managed two upper cuts before she felt a heavy stabbing pain tear through her gut. And she collapsed to the ground, groaning and dropping her saber into the sand.

"Pearl!" Garnet now ran over, helping her friend to her feet.

"Just trying to stay in shape," Pearl managed through gritted teeth.

"You can't do this," Garnet scolded. "Not now. You're going to hurt yourself worse than you already are."
"I'd rather hurt myself now than be killed later on," she said, brushing away Garnet's hand and shooting her a defiant glare.

"Pearl, what do you think's gonna happen? You got beaten up with a fucking metal rod. Your shoulder is probably hamburger meat and your stomach's...I don't know which I'm more afraid of. Anyway, we came here to hide. You need to get better. And you're not going to get better hurting yourself."

"I'm not going to stay alive unless I can fight," Pearl insisted, moving towards her sword. Garnet stepped past her and picked it up.

"Go upstairs and rest," Garnet said soothingly. "We can talk later. But there won't be a later if you keep doing this to yourself."

After a moment, Pearl nodded slowly, almost shamefully. She started to walk and stumbled; Garnet held her arm out and let Pearl lean on her as they walked back to the beach house.

She never got around to lecturing Pearl about being nicer to Greg. Right now, Garnet felt it was more important that Pearl not drive herself to exhaustion, or worse, trying to prove how tough she was.

Amethyst was still trying to get the television to work, though she had little idea beyond hitting it and fiddling with the bunny ears. Peridot sat in the living room, unsure of what to do, both bored and guilty about her exchange with Lapis.

Lapis remained in her bedroom; she had cleaned up her little altar as quickly as she could and thrown it in the trash, then grabbed a book off the shelf and started reading it. Fortunately, whoever currently owned the beach house had a decent collection of beach reads and political books; Lapis chose a James Michener book that she'd read before and quickly blazed through the first few chapters.

A few minutes of connection, then back to being alone. Such was life.

"Hey P, you don't look so good," Amethyst said, watching Garnet and Pearl enter the room.

"Just fine," Pearl said, forcing herself to smile. "Trying to keep myself in shape..."

"Do you need to see a doctor or something?" Amethyst said, ignoring Pearl's attempt at a joke. "I mean, I knew Jasper messed you up, but..."

"Maybe," Pearl admitted. "Right now, I just need to lay down."

"I'll get some ice," Peridot offered, rushing to the kitchen.

"What part hurts?" Amethyst said.

"My stomach," Pearl groaned.

"Jasper must really have done a number on you," Amethyst said.

They managed to go up a few stairs to the bedroom before Pearl screamed in agony and collapsed, losing consciousness.

"Oh my God! Pearl!" Amethyst shouted.

"Get her over to the couch," Garnet ordered. Amethyst helped her carry their stricken friend over to
the couch and laid her down. Peridot rushed in with her ice.

"She has a fever," Peridot noted, feeling her forehead.

"Has she been throwing up or anything?" Amethyst asked.

"Not that I know of," Garnet said. "But she's been working hard all morning, and I think this little training exercise put her over the top."

Amethyst shook her head. "Man, girl really needs to know when not to push herself."

"What's going on?" Lapis asked, appearing at the top of the stairs.

"Pearl's not doing so hot," Amethyst said with understatement.

Lapis rushed downstairs to take a look and felt her forehead. "Jeez, she's burning up!" she said.

Garnet delicately raised Pearl's shirt and touched her stomach. Pearl winced and groaned despite being unconscious.

"She needs a doctor, now," Garnet decided.

"I know some basic medical stuff," Peridot offered.

"That's gonna be tricky, don't ya think?" Amethyst asked.

"It's either that, or Pearl dies," Garnet said. "Dunno about you, but I don't fancy losing a friend to something treatable. Peridot, you're from around here, yeah?"

"Right."

"Any good doctors in town?"

Peridot wracked her brain. "I used to go to Dr. Maheswaran when I lived in Beach City," she offered. "Dunno if she still practices here..."

"Well, there's no harm in trying," Garnet asked. "I'll tell Greg to get the van ready."

As Garnet rushed outside, Amethyst, Lapis and Peridot looked at each other, then at Pearl, who looked deeply uncomfortable and in pain.

"Don't worry, P," Amethyst said, clutching her friend's hand. "We're not gonna let this happen to you..."

And Peridot felt tears welling in her eyes. Feeling that this was all her fault.

Part of her wanted to run upstairs and hide. But no. She wasn't going to let Pearl die on her watch. And if there was any way she could help, she would.
Awakening

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains racial and homophobic slurs in an historically appropriate context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pearl spent the rest of Sunday drifting in and out of consciousness. After collapsing, she remembered only flashes, clouded by a deep, dreamless sleep.

And the pain. The endless flashes of searing abdominal pain penetrating through the darkness.

Her longest memory involved being rushed down a hospital corridor. She recognized it instantly for that sterile smell. And a flash of Garnet's face looking uncommonly terrified; two orderlies rushing her down the hallway; a lady doctor slipping a surgical mask on...

Settling into a brightly lit room...someone pushing a mask towards her face...

Another stab of pain as her eyes flickered open to see...

A surgical scalpel glimmering in the harsh light...

A face and a knife and a scream.

It took awhile before Pearl realized the true implications of her new job.

In late 1967, Miss Gandy attached her to a special project known as COINTELPRO. Pearl wasn't briefed on the particulars of this program, only that it involved highly sensitive operations. "So much as think about it outside of work hours," Gandy warned, "and you'll be fired. Say anything and we'll persuade the Attorney General to press some serious charges against you. This is not a game."

This struck Pearl as an enticement more than a warning. She'd long wanted to do something of actual value within the government, and what better than a Top Secret Project? She wrote her dad a letter comparing herself to Maxwell Smart from the TV show, joking "I bet you never thought your daughter would become a secret agent!"

Pearl was never particularly political, though she reflected the prejudices of someone from her time and background. She used the words "Negroes" and "colored people" to describe African-Americans long after acceptable vernacular shifted away from them. She found Martin Luther King and the assorted antiwar protesters to be loudmouths and troublemakers, without really thinking about what they had to say. More than anything, she had her father's deeply ingrained patriotism and respect for authority, traits she still wrestled with all these years later.

She never thought to seriously question these views and values; never had much occasion to, really. Sure, she would occasionally blanch when colleagues and acquaintances used harsher racial epithets against King and other Civil Rights leaders. She grew annoyed at the behavior of her uncle Andy, who liked to claim that "the only crime Joe McCarthy committed was being right!" She practically disowned her brother for showing up to a Thanksgiving dinner wearing a George
But these were minor annoyances she could live with, not something that deeply impacted her. Anyone outside Pearl's immediate circle mattered to her the bare minimum decorum required, newspaper headlines and TV reports to be pondered and reflected over briefly over breakfast or lunch, then forgotten in the 9-to-5 grind. Could be safely compartmentalized as Something That Didn't Matter.

Then she started work, and it grew harder and harder to remain detached.

She transcribed action memos and suggestions for covert behavior between Hoover, Assistant Director William Sullivan and numerous lower level agents. Many of them were written in longhand and she needed to put them. Her job, as before, involved recording and transmitting the thoughts of others rather than offering her own opinions and ideas. This time, the information was much different from banal interoffice memos and financial reports.

The first memo she transcribed set the tone: "The Director hopes that this program will enable agents and operatives to act more effectively against subversive groups within the United States, be they Black Nationalist hate groups (a more urgent threat, we feel, than the KKK and similar white nationalist hate groups, which have been demoralized by recent Bureau activity re: Civil Rights), the radical antiwar Left and particularly socialist and Communist influences on college campuses, in labor unions and other activist organizations. While we must make all efforts to work within the law, neither must we rule out the possibility of extra-legal and extra-judicial means in containing these forces."

It seemed important, exciting, dangerous. And Pearl felt a little thrill course through her as she typed these words.

She became familiar, if only through references couched in Bureau speak and Hooverian invective, with obscure-to-her organizations like the Socialist Workers' Party, the Youth International Party, the Students for a Democratic Society, and a million other exotic. All left wing radicals, from what she could tell, and precisely the sort of people the FBI should be subverting.

It took awhile for its true import to sink in. Like when she started reading about proposed Bureau tactics against the SWP's Chicago branch, for instance:

"Suggestion from Chicago office: Sew distrust within this group by distributing letters and other means to cause fights and fracture within the organization. We cannot underestimate the impact of comic strips and cartoons, for instance, in ridiculing socialist leaders as too extreme for the movement. Here is a suggested format for a letter to be used against, for instance, an antiwar leader with overly radical sympathies..."

Pearl thought it faintly ridiculous, at the time. Even amusing, that the government would such childish tactics against a small fringe group.

But it didn't seem amusing in other instances. As when she transcribed a note from AD Sullivan, commenting that "Labor unions in this country are dangerously close to Communist takeover. Suggest campaign of subversion against, for instance, leftists within the AFL-CIO and United Mine Workers of America to avoid their gaining undue influence."

Then there was the time she came across a skin-crawling reference to "using agents provocateur to discredit SDS and other radical groups planning antiwar protests in Chicago and Madison through extreme actions."
The malice and gleeful trouble-making - the perverse joy in hurting people - cut straight through the bureaucratic euphemisms. She didn't even want to think what that might mean.

But more than anything, it was the blacks that seemed to obsess Hoover. Particularly Martin Luther King, who Pearl would see referred to as a "monster" and a "Communist" and far worse language in what were ostensibly dispassionate, official memos. The coarseness of the language shocked Pearl, almost as much as the content. She read suggestions from different FBI officials on how to counter King's influence, to wit:

"Write letters to the editor from 'concerned Negroes' suggesting that King is more closely aligned with the radical faction of the Black Power movement (eg. Stokely Carmichael, Black Panthers, etc.) than he professes in public, and that such alliances discredit the movement, etc."

"We can resume our past projects of discrediting King by mailing tape recordings of his amorous encounters to other Black leaders, along with messages asking "is this the man we want leading us?" Suggest moderate alternatives like Roy Wilkins, etc. which may increase the possibility of infighting among King's allies."

"Send provocateurs to disrupt King's speeches and rallies, suggesting that he's playing into the hands of Wallace, Nixon, etc. by opposing the war and acting like a Communist."

"Stress Bayard Rustin's perversions and ask why King would associate himself with such a sorry excuse for a man." Sullivan added a note, saying "a Communist and a Queer! How useful."

(Rustin, one of King's closest allies, was a homosexual; Pearl didn't know this until she read the note, shivering to think what Sullivan would think about her. Then she remembered how many gay and lesbians had lost their jobs in the "Lavender Scare" a decade earlier, their sexuality marking them as security risks. And grew deeply sick.)

One such missive, incredibly, came with a handwritten note from J. Edgar Hoover himself. Pearl went pale as a ghost reading it:

"This will destroy the burrhead. - J.E. Hoover"

Those eight words destroyed Pearl's faith in her job, in the Bureau, perhaps even in the country. A lifetime of platitudes absorbed unthinkingly exploded all at once.

And, worst of all, thinking - knowing - that she was complicit in it. Thinking that she'd witnessed all the conversations she'd had with colleagues spouting coarse language about "Negroes" and "radicals" ruining the country, and all she'd done was feel mildly uncomfortable. Once or twice, moving to another lunch table on the excuse that "I don't want to talk politics today."

That was the whole of her protest against the Bureau attacking and subverting black people. Eating lunch by herself.

In every way that mattered, she was complicit.

She went through the rest of the day in an angry daze. Then went home, ate a quick dinner, and rushed out for evening fencing practice at her preferred gym.

She usually reserved her fury on the dummies by imagining safe targets: the pirates and Indians of childhood movie serials, the Nazis and Japanese of her childhood wars, occasionally criminals like John Dillinger and Al Capone.

Now, she thought about jamming her epee through J. Edgar Hoover's swollen, geriatric, racist gut.
Being a rebel thrilled her, even if she was only rebelling in her mind. But she still didn't think she'd do anything about it.

At least Pearl had Rose. She struggled not to tell her detailed information about her work, remembering Miss Gandy's words a few months earlier. But she made it clear that whatever was going on was weighing on her, and it was something bad.

"This country is a complete mess," Rose told her one night as they lay in bed, giving Pearl a massage. "It's not your fault. You're just doing your job."

"Maybe," Pearl sighed. But she didn't believe it. Martin Luther King had been assassinated not long before, and that awful Hoover letter rang in her mind every time she thought about it. And two colleagues who had said with resignation, "One less thing to worry about," after hearing the news.

She hadn't liked King when he was alive, but she couldn't see reacting to anyone's murder in such a flippant fashion, no more how much she despised them. The riots after his death only confirmed her worst thoughts. That something Evil was afoot in the country, and she was letting it happen.

Or, worse, helping it happen.

There were far worse things than a Negro demanding equal rights.

"No, I can't accept that," Pearl said to Rose. "I can't accept that I can't do something. I see evil done in my name - in the country's name - every day, and I do nothing. What's the saying about evil triumphing when good men do nothing?"

Pearl laid herself across Rose's lap, face down in the bed. She couldn't cry or feel anything; she was just numb.

"Maybe there is something you can do," Rose said, running a hand through Pearl's hair.

Pearl looked at her with curiosity.

"The first thing is to quit your job," Rose offered. Then immediately regretted it. "But I would never ask you to do that."

"I've thought about that," Pearl insisted. "I've thought about it many, many times before. That's just another impotent protest that achieves nothing."

Rose gently pushed Pearl off her lap and coaxed her to sit up, facing Rose in bed.

"Well, is there anything you can do from the inside?" she asked.

"I doubt it," Pearl said acidly. "No one wants to hear what I want to say. They just want me to type."

Rose frowned, trying to weigh her partner's options.

"Maybe there are some, small ways that you can help," Rose said. "I have some friends who are involved in antiwar groups..."

"If they even suspected I took part in some kind of protest, I'd be fired," Pearl moaned.

Rose hadn't thought about that. "J. Edgar would have a heart attack," she said.

"Good riddance," Pearl added. Somewhat stunned by her own words, she laughed.
“See, that's one thing, Pearl,” Rose said. “You never would have said that, like, even a few months ago.”

“I've never thought of someone who could change,” Pearl admitted. "I'm almost thirty, and I've been basically the same person my whole life. Pearl, the Navy Brat. Pearl, the Law Student. Pearl, the FBI Typist.” She smiled, her eyes brimming with tears. "Pearl, the Closeted Lesbian. All the same person.”

"Did you ever think that maybe that's a good thing?” Rose offered.

Pearl laughed scornfully, but Rose put a hand on her shoulder and looked her partner in the eye.

"There are a few constants in your life," Rose said, "but think about them. You want to work hard. You want to do good. You want to be a decent person. That's how you can spend your whole life loving your country and still find what you're seeing repulsive.”

"Maybe,” Pearl grunted, swirling a finger on the bed sheet.

"But, like I said...a few months ago you wouldn't even have joked about your job,” Rose reminded her. "And there's no way you'd think anything you were doing was a bad thing. So, you have grown and changed, no matter what you tell yourself."

Pearl smiled ruefully. "So what you're saying is, I needed you to change.”

"Oh Pearl,” Rose said, hugging her. "That's not what I'm saying at all. Maybe we bring out the best in each other.”

"What do I bring out in you?” Pearl wondered.

Rose chuckled, until she realized that Pearl wasn't kidding. That her smile had faded to a forlorn frown.

Did she really have no concept of how she could impact people? Did she really think no one could love her for her? Rose couldn't fathom Pearl refusing to admit her good qualities, which seemed so obvious to her that she couldn't explain them.

"You make me realize how deeply one person can love another,” Rose said, sadly and simply.

Pearl put a hand on Rose's face, staring into her lover's eyes, absorbing every ounce of warmth and courage she could. Then she sighed and buried her head in Rose's chest.

"My Pearl,” Rose said again, holding Pearl tight. "You are a good person. You don't need me to be a good person. But, if it helps, maybe I could help you meet some people who could...well, at the very least they might widen your horizons.”


Rose smiled, patting Pearl's hair again. "You'll see."

"Pearl's condition is very serious,” Dr. Maheswaran said. "Her appendix had burst and there were tears in her abdominal wall. If you'd waited any longer to bring her here, she would have died.”

"She's gonna be okay now though, right?” Amethyst asked.

"She should be fine,” the Doctor said, "unless a secondary infection sets in. Which isn't
impossible...We removed her appendix and stitched up as many of the lacerations as we could."

"How long does she need to be hospitalized for?"

"Well, she'll need to stay for the next two or three days to be sure. If she hasn't developed a serious infection she can go home after that. But it will take her a few weeks before she can be active at all."

"Weeks?" Amethyst looked at Garnet and Greg. "Pearl won't like that."

"Pearl has to accept it," Garnet said. "She had a very serious accident and she refused to take care of herself afterwards." She looked at the Doctor.

"Fencing certainly isn't recommended after an...accident," Dr. Maheswaran said, her tone indicating skepticism. But she wasn't willing to press the issue, possibly because something else bothered her.

"Anyway...I always hate to bring it up, especially after a close call like this, but Pearl doesn't seem to have insurance..."

Of course this would come up eventually.

"...and, well, an appendectomy and several days in hospital will run a pretty hefty bill."

"How hefty are we talkin'?" Greg asked.

The Doctor grimaced and wrote a figure on her clipboard.

"I got this," Greg said, writing out a check on the spot. Dr. Maheswaran's mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Greg, you don't have to..." Garnet insisted.

"It's cool," Greg insisted, handing the check to the Doctor. "Not like I was spending it on anything worthwhile, anyway. Just decals for my van...and food."

"Hey, if there's anything we have plenty of, it's food!" Amethyst said, slapping Greg on the back.

"Anyway," the Doctor said, still a bit stunned at Greg's generosity. "Thanks for, um, taking care of this. If there's any difference in the final bill, we'll sort it out later. You folks can come back in the morning if you like."

"We'll only leave if she's out of danger," Garnet insisted. Greg and Amethyst nodded in agreement.

"Trust me, she'll be fine," Dr. Maheswaran said. "You guys did a better job taking care of her than she did."

Amethyst started walking down the hallway first, her face still twisted with worry. Greg went after her, only to stop when Garnet put a hand on his shoulder.

"And you worried that you weren't a good guy," Garnet said with a smile.

Greg shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "You can just put it on my tab," he said, making a joke of the situation.

They started to exit the waiting room, when Greg caught a look at the television. "Would ya look at this?"
Garnet looked up and saw Howard Baker spouting platitudes into a microphone.

"They're still holding those hearings, huh?" Garnet was nonplussed.

"First time I've seen a woman testifying, though," Greg said, watching the screen with a flicker of interest.

This did intrigue Garnet, just a little bit. She adjusted her glasses as the camera cut back to the witness.

She looked like a little girl dressed up for school, wearing a dark blue dress with a tie and bobbed, chin-length black hair. Yet the television caption indicated otherwise:

AQUAMARINE MONTAGUE - ASSISTANT DIRECTOR - SPECIAL ACTIVITIES DIVISION

Chapter End Notes

Most of the memos Pearl helps write are paraphrased from real COINTELPRO documents found in Nelson Blackstock's COINTELPRO: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom (1988 reprint). Most books on MLK or Hoover will discuss Hoover's vendetta against King, though for a particularly detailed treatment see David J. Garrow's The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1981). The "burrhead" comment by Hoover came much earlier (I think around 1963) but it was too good of a tidbit not to include.

Thanks as always to my readers, including Without_name for reviewing the last chapter!
Aquamarine

Chapter Notes

Chapter contains a homophobic slur used in an historically appropriate context

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 29, 1975

Washington, DC

"...I must say, Ms. Montague, that after the past few weeks of witnesses, you're certainly a sight for sore eyes."

*Shove your condescension up your arse,* Aquamarine thought while smiling politely, folding her hands like a child listening to a school lecture.

"I would object to the Senator from Michigan's remarks," her counsel said, more for the record than from personal conviction. "Ms. Montague is a long-serving public servant and intelligence official, and I don't think it's appropriate for anyone to speak to her in that fashion."

"The Senator withdraws his remark and apologizes to the witness."

Aquamarine sat silently, pretending to be unfazed. What's one more indignity among a lifetime of them? Except this one was on television, being watched millions of people, and it did rankle. She made a mental note to inquire afterwards whether Senator Hart had any skeletons in his unctuous closet.

"I must say first of all, that I am very impressed that a woman could rise to such a prestigious position within a government agency."

Well, at least this was *well-intentioned* condescension.

"It certainly hasn't been easy," Aquamarine admitted, speaking in a clipped London accent. "My colleagues are loathe to admit it, but the Agency is a very much a boy's club, just like *every other part* of government."

There were murmurs in the hearing room, as none could miss the intent of her remark. Cameras captured the pleased, smug grin slipping over Ms. Montague’s face, and the Senators’ chagrined reaction. Senator Hart, seeming more annoyed than ashamed by her feistiness, resumed questioning:

"You were, um, not born in the United States, correct?"

"I was not. I was born in April 1934 in London to English parents."

"Are you an American citizen?"

"Indeed I am. I have lived in this country since 1948 and formally became a citizen ten years later."

"Throughout that time period of time, have you worked consistently for the Central Intelligence
"I have worked for the Central Intelligence Agency since 1956."

"How did you come to be employed by this organization?"

"My mother was a British intelligence operative. She was seconded to the OSS during the Second World War and moved to the United States after the war. I suppose espionage runs in the family."

Slight laughter at her remarks. She beamed for the cameras, exploiting the media's love for a picturesque face.

There were plenty of things that she didn't care to mention, of course. That her mother had first arrived in the United States before the war to track German spies and fascist sympathizers operating in neutral America. That her father, a major in the SOE, was captured during a commando mission in Albania and was tortured to death by Italian Blackshirts. That she, as a teenager, flitted between the US and UK and continental Europe with her mom, occasionally taking part in her parents' mission by delivering papers and weapons and poison capsules.

Or, for that matter, how she was only 16 years old when she tracked down the ex-Colonel who had killed her father, and now worked for the Italian Defense Ministry courtesy of Operation Gladio, the CIA's anticommmunist forgive-and-forget-Fascism program. And seduced him, and killed him by poisoning his drink in a hotel room during a NATO conference in Brussels.

Or how, over the next decade-and-a-half, she worked both as an intelligence operative (for the American and British governments) and occasional assassin (for herself) in western Europe, keeping tabs on Communists while trying to settle scores with fascists who avoided justice. The latter, of course, was a secret mission that her bosses weren't aware of; it was also something mildly distasteful to them, since fascists of all sorts were more useful alive than dead in the Cold War.

She'd done a pretty good job covering her tracks. The seventeen people she'd killed between 1950 and 1971 were attributed variously to the KGB or crime syndicates or individual vigilantes or, in her most recent personal missions the Italian Red Brigades. Which made her laugh; if the Red Brigades wanted you dead, they would shoot you in public or take you hostage and read pompous manifestos about the Revolution on television. A neat bullet to the back of the head wasn't their style.

So far as her bosses knew, she was just someone who neatly and efficiently managed anti-Communist operations throughout her career. And evidently did it very well, as the longer she stayed, the more responsibility her superiors entrusted her with.

Like, for instance, Project DIAMOND.

None of this came up directly in her testimony, of course, because her history was a personal secret concealed within a professional secret. Instead, she was subjected to questions far more banal, and less probing or accusatory than her male colleagues.

Senator GOLDWATER: "How did you come to be promoted to your current position?"

Ms. MONTAGUE, witness: "I suppose you could call it a belated step in the right direction. During Mr. Schlesinger's term as DCI in early 1973, he desired to promote a high-ranking female as a sign of the Agency's commitment to change and reform. Somehow, he chose me."

Translation: "Jim Schlesinger needed someone he could depend on to help clean house with a minimum of fuss and attention. Who would suspect the Agency of giving a woman a serious
responsibility? Certainly not a reactionary fossil like you, Barry."

Senator MONDALE: "Ms. Montague, are you familiar with a document that's been referred to in the press as the Family Jewels?"

Ms. MONTAGUE: "I have heard the term, yes."

Senator MONDALE: "Could you please explain your understanding of what they are?"

Ms. MONTAGUE: "When Mr. Schlesinger took over as DCI, he hoped to gather information on abuses by the Agency, specifically actions committed in violation of its charter. This was done in order to examine and study patterns of past abuse in order to prevent future ones."

Translation: "Dick Nixon put one of his pals in charge of the CIA to plunder it for secrets and blackmail material. We complied with his request because what else could we have done? Until Mr. Schlesinger decided that some secrets needed to be kept secret."

Senator MONDALE: "How did he make this request?"

Ms. MONTAGUE: "He sent memos to different department heads, including myself, requesting that information be forwarded to him discreetly through official channels."

Translation: "Except where it was especially damaging material necessary to bury or destroy immediately."

Senator MONDALE: "Can you confirm, then, that these documents exist?"

Ms. MONTAGUE: "I can confirm that there was indeed an effort to gather and study this information. I do not know that they were compiled into a single document or location, as has been implied by the press."

Translation: "Come and find them, pal."

Overall, she spent about four-and-a-half hours on the stand answering rather feeble questions. The Senators regarded her throughout with condescension and curiosity, unsure how to handle her, thus deciding to gingerly pepper her with mostly procedural inquiries that anyone could have answered. She was mildly annoyed that they were distracting from her work, a little amused at their fumbling.

If this was the best that Congress, with all its formidable legal powers could do, Aquamarine mused, then the Agency really has nothing to worry about it.

Senator CHURCH, Chairman: "Ms. Montague, thank you for your testimony today. We appreciate your time and candor in testifying before us."

Ms. MONTAGUE: "Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will say, not in my official capacity but as a person, that I appreciate your efforts to hold an honest and open inquiry into the Agency and its operations. I know this isn't a universally held opinion, but I believe it to be true. The country will be better off for your efforts."

Translation: "You were just played by a pro, you fatuous, preening chump. Better luck next time."

Outside the hearing room, Aquamarine smiled wanly as reporters showered her with questions, as flashbulbs clicked and video cameras rolled. The Senate might not take her seriously, but the press certainly wanted to build her up as some kind of sexy spy queen. They were a bit disappointed then
at her height and unwillingness to answer questions.

As she left, Aquamarine felt a stab of concern. She saw Richard Helms, of all people - the former DCI, now Ambassador to Iran - speaking with someone in a corner of the room, in an obvious state of agitation. Curious, she drew closer and recognized Helms' target of abuse, Daniel Schorr of CBS News, who had ran several unflattering reports on the Agency.

"You cocksucker!" Helms exploded. "You killer! Killer Schorr - that's what they ought to call you!"

"Dick, I don't think..." Schorr said, seeming more amused than anything.

"Oh, you don't think? That is fucking obvious. How many agents do you think will be compromised or killed because of your little inquiry in there?" Helms demanded. "When the bodies start piling up in Europe and Asia and fucking Angola, it will be all your goddamn fault."

"I'm sure you have plenty of ways to prevent that from happening," Schorr muttered.

"Fuck you," Helms said. "You goddamn cocksucking killer."

"Pardon me, gentlemen," Aquamarine interrupted. Helms looked down at her, a bit embarrassed at his foul language. Aquamarine made little effort to hide her pleasure at his discomfort.

"Ms. Montague, I forgot you were testifying today," Helms said.

"Mr. Ambassador, it is wonderful as always to see you. And Mr. Schorr, out to find the truth as always."

"Yes, ma'am," the flustered reporter said, bowing his head.

"Could I have a moment with the Ambassador?" Aquamarine asked, turning on her charm.

"Certainly," Schorr said. "I believe I've experienced enough invective for one day."

"You could stand here a lifetime and never experience what you deserve," Helms grumbled as the reporter walked off, smirking smugly.

Helms waited until Schorr was carefully out of earshot and led Aquamarine to a small anteroom.

"Well?" Helms asked.

"You're looking good, Dick."

"And so are you. What the hell's going on?"

"They're a bunch of pussies. Didn't think they could ask a woman, especially a woman like me, any questions that led anywhere, because how could I know anything? For once, male chauvinism works to my advantage."

"I imagine it works to your advantage in a number of ways."

"Don't try and banter, Dick, you've never been good at it. You couldn't charm a French prostitute in a red light district."

"Did you stop by just to abuse me? What the fuck..."

"Naughty words, Mr. Ambassador."
"Enough!" he barked, struggling to keep his voice around a whisper. "Project DIAMOND. Something has gone wrong."

"Hmm. Yes, I heard about what happened in Hagerstown."

"Six armed operatives attacked and badly injured by a group of armed women. Their leader missing and presumed dead. The attackers escaped."

"So I've seen the same reports as you. What of it?"

"Well, this is your department, Aquamarine. What are you doing about it?"

"Once I get back to my office, I'll take control of this myself."

"You should have done that from the start..."

"Perhaps, but I am a busy woman."

Helms smirked. "I never would have promoted you, you know."

"Yes, and do you know why?" Aquamarine baited him.

"Because you were too valuable where you were."

"Well, that might be what you tell yourself...But yes, it's hard to find time with my current job to do a lot that's hands-on."

"I'm sure." Helms looked around and heard murmurs from the hall as another witness approached the hearing room.

"Probably best not to have this conversation here," he added. "See to it. Figure out who the hell was behind this attack and where they are now. And what happened with this Lazuli broad and her weird little friend. She worked for one of the Senators on the committee, I think. Take care of that, too."

"I'll do my best," Aquamarine assured him. "But Dick, you're forgetting one thing."

"What's that?"

Aquamarine smirked at him, relishing what she was about to say.

"I don't work for you any more."

Aquamarine sequestered herself in her small office, reading newspaper clippings of the Hagerstown affair. Local police seemed baffled, and eyewitnesses could only give general descriptions of the participants, but it was clear they were all women, one white, one Negro, one of indeterminate ethnicity. She felt a small stab of pleasure that they'd managed to outfight six men.

They only found five of the operatives at the scene, all in varying states of injury and shock. Their leader, Jasper, had disappeared, though police found huge amounts of blood spilled on the pavement and the surrounding bushes. There were shell casings from several different weapons, a smash late-model car, a broken hotel door and a hotel detective who claimed that he'd been blasted by the Negro woman with a shotgun.

Aquamarine grimaced. She'd never liked Jasper, a holdover from the rough days when the Company teamed up with mobsters and fascists to murder anyone they considered an enemy. Still, she was
exactly the person that you'd want for a job like this: someone tough and reliable and determined...and old and expendable, not valued by anyone. If she'd completed her task, her death would have been no great loss to Aquamarine, or the Company for that matter.

Still, she had two names left on her list. One was Lapis Lazuli, whom Aquamarine knew by reputation. One of the Agency's best informants and agents provocateur during the CHAOS program...and also a troublemaker in her own right. Because she had deserted the program in spectacular fashion, attacking an agency station in Cleveland, stealing a copy of the Family Jewels, then disappearing with it. Lord knows how she'd even known it was there.

But then, Lord knows why there was even a copy of this memo floating around Cleveland. There must be *some* copies out there for reporters to see - Mr. Schorr knew about it, as did Seymour Hersh, whose columns exposing illicit CIA activities the previous winter had triggered the investigation in the first place, and so did enough people in the press and Washington.

But then, she thought wryly, why the hell did the FBI keep all their intelligence documents in Media, Pennsylvania, where radicals could easily steal them?

Which brought her to her next subject: Pearl White. She was an elusive one, too, having vanished off the face of the Earth since resigning from the FBI in late 1971. There were rumored sightings of her in DC, New York and other cities throughout the years; the IRS had tax records from the past two years, though they had audited the reports several times believing that the information was inaccurate or deliberately falsified. She appeared to have some private income, the source of which she didn't divulge, and which proved impossible to trace through normal channels.

Aquamarine knew that one should never underestimate a secretary's resourcefulness.

They believed they had her pinned down to an apartment in Washington with two other women. One was Amethyst Marquez, aged 25, born in New York City to Puerto Rican parents, with a criminal record and a history of fairly menial employment. The other was more interesting: Garnet Scofield, aged 30, a Negro from Chicago, who had lost a teaching job in Cook County due to her supposed connections to Radical Left and Black Power groups, then reemerged in Washington to teach at a small local school.

And they had tapped the telephone. And intercepted a conversation between Pearl White and Peridot Khoury, aide to Senator Dewey. A member of the Committee. Who was also in touch with Lapis Lazuli.

Patterns were emerging.

It didn't take any particular brainpower or intuition on Aquamarine's part to connect everything. Just a bare minimum of effort, which, she groused, no one seemed able to do. She found an old file picture of Pearl taking part in an amateur fencing contest in Georgetown in 1966, coming in second place.

She remembered the description of one of the women, "tall, with reddish hair, used a sword or some kinda bladed weapon..."

It wasn't hard to draw the connection. Once she made one leap, it was easy enough to make a bigger one.

This was Pearl White. Upon realizing this, Aquamarine felt a stab of guarded admiration.

Jasper had obviously underestimated her. Being the brute that she was, she may not even have
appreciated that she was fighting one of the women on her list.

It impressed Aquamarine enough that Pearl, considering her background and personality, could arm and train herself so that she was tough enough to take down a seasoned professional killer. But to bring two other women along with her and wreak havoc with an entire team of operatives? That took some moxie!

She sorted through other files, looking for more patterns.

And found another recent clipping from the Washington Post...three more men, two CIA assets, the other a member of Paraguayan military intelligence, had been found in a warehouse near an exploded automobile. Aquamarine had one of her aides rifle through some departmental files, and found a memo outlining a planned arms exchange in DC around that time. (The specifics were vague, only that the exchange "had not taken place as planned," and that new weapons must be acquired "before the operation can be rescheduled.")

And several similar incidents, acts of violence targeting CIA operatives, military officials, FBI agents, even local cops in and around the Capital...over the past three years.

And she started to realize that, whatever else might be said of Pearl White and these friends of hers, they weren't messing around. They may well be fools or amateurs, but they wouldn't be easy to take down.

And now they'd disappeared again.

Aquamarine regarded the mess of photos and files and papers on her desk and leaned back in her chair, her face curling into a smug smirk. It wouldn't be easy to handle all of this, it would take a lot of work. But it would be done. And these three ladies, plus Misses Lazuli and Khouri, could consider their days numbered.

Because now, Aquamarine Montague was on the case.

Chapter End Notes

There are no shortage of books on the CIA; good general histories of the CIA, though, are hard to find, since they tend to be either polemics, conspiracy rants or full-blown apologias, none of which are very helpful except in aggregate. I still like Thomas Powers' The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA (1978) better than more recent works like, say, Tim Weiner's Legacy of Ashes (2008), which is filled with both editorializing and errors.

The confrontation between Richard Helms and Daniel Schorr took place a few months earlier than this, but like the Hoover quote last chapter it was too good not to include here. I'm taking another short break, and should have the next chapter for you on Saturday. Thanks again to everyone who's reading!
Here finally is something of Garnet's backstory. This may or may not be the final flashback; I'll try incorporating exposition/etc. more organically in future chapters.

**October 1, 1975**

**Beach City, DV**

It took Pearl several days before she was ready to return home. While Garnet, Greg and Amethyst gathered her from the hospital, Peridot and Lapis threw a small celebration which mostly involved cocktail weenies and some hastily drawn "Welcome Home" posters.

"Sorry, I'd have done better if I had any paint supplies," Lapis apologized.

Pearl was still too worn out to care. Dr. Maheshawaran said it might take a few weeks - time they really didn't have - for Pearl to get better. Though she protested she was fine and would be up sooner than that, Garnet made sure she was bundled up into her

"You don't have to dote on me, you know," Pearl insisted as Garnet gave her a glass of water.

"It's not doting," Garnet insisted. "You're hurt, you need rest and help."

"I can walk to the next room and get myself a glass of water."

"But you shouldn't have to."

It had taken awhile for Garnet to truly like and respect Pearl, to tolerate her lapses into prejudice and stereotypes and dated vernacular (explaining why she preferred black to Negro was particularly frustrating, especially the sixth time), not to mention her nitpicking and high-strung personality. But Garnet found her admirable qualities outweighing her shortcomings: her brains, her talent for organization, her hard work and commitment, her loving, almost motherly dedication to her and Amethyst. And most of all, her willingness to disavow and break with her background, her previous life, everything she'd stood for and believed in, in order to serve a greater good they both wanted.

But, Garnet reminded herself resentfully, Pearl had the choice of disavowing everything. Garnet, and Amethyst for that matter, didn't. No matter what they tried or how they acted, society would always treat them the same way. It didn't have any more use for Garnet, clean-cut, educated black woman than it did Garnet, renegade sister with a shotgun.

Garnet put down a pair of painkillers next to the glass of water. Pearl stared at them, her face a strange mix of surprise and resentment, then washed them down with a quick drink of water.

"About time someone mother you for a change," Garnet joked.

"Too bad it couldn't be under better circumstances," Pearl grumbled.

Garnet looked down and regarded her friend's injuries. Though a loose-fitting t-shirt covered up her
body, she seemed thin and pale, even more than usual, and without her usual pep or nervousness despite her feeble protests. She looked like a wounded bird. And Garnet knew that, whatever Pearl's strengths, she needed support more than anything right now.

“Miss Scofield, we pride ourselves on tolerance in this school district, but we do have limits from what sort of actions and behaviors we'll accept from teachers. Children's lives and futures are at stake, and we have some serious questions about your conduct.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Don't you? We had a parent of one your children complain that you used disparaging words about former President Johnson in class.”

“I mentioned that he, as President, was responsible for escalating the Vietnam War. I don't consider that disparaging.”

“In what context, may I ask? That's certainly a heavy subject of conversation for middle schoolers.”

“A student asked me why American troops were in Vietnam. I explained that the war started a decade ago, that Kennedy and Johnson escalated it and that the current President says that he's going to end it but hasn't done anything yet to show that he's planning to.”

“I have authority that you did a bit more than. Did you stop to explain the Communist aggression and atrocities occurring in Vietnam?”

“No, I didn't. But to be fair, I didn't explain American or South Vietnamese atrocities either...”

“Alleged atrocities. Did you explain Communist efforts to subvert democracy and commit genocide against the people of Vietnam?”

“It didn't come up.”

“Huh. Did you explain how Vietnam is part of our global war to contain Communism?”

“I'm sorry, are you being seriousness right now?”

“Why would you assume we weren't?”

“I feel like I'm trapped in a Kafka novel.”

“Miss Scofield, we know you're well-educated. You don't need to remind us of that.”

“Evidently I do.”

“Did you attend a rally held by Stokely Carmichael in Chicago last year?”

“...What on Earth does that have to do with anything?”

“Did you attend a rally held by Stokely Carmichael in Chicago last year?”

“You know, Bob Scarlet is a card-carrying member of the John Birch Society and I don't see you asking him...”

“Answer the question, please.”
“Yes, I did.”

"Are you aware that Mr. Carmichael advocates a radical restructuring of American society, exclusionary policies towards whites and a pan-African state?"

"I am aware that his words and actions are willfully misinterpreted by the ignorant and insecure in an effort to discredit all efforts at racial progress and equality."

"Would you consider Spiro Agnew, our Vice President, to be ignorant and insecure for criticizing Mr. Carmichael?"

"I think he is better at alliteration than coolly assessing racial politics."

"Could you please just answer our questions?"

"Could you please stop asking insulting, loaded questions? Are you going to ask me whether I stopped beating my boyfriend next?"

"Well, since you mention it..."

"Jesus Christ."

"Language, Ms. Scofield. Let me remind you that you're on exceedingly thin ice already. Now, there is an accusation here that you have had improper relationship with one of your students..."

"You had damn well better have evidence of that."

"Testimony of a child's parents."

"Who? Which parent?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Which student?"

"I can't tell you that, either."

"...Then how am I supposed to...?"

"Because you should be able to answer whether or not you have improper relationships with students, without knowing the specifics of who accused you."

"Did a student accuse me?"

"I said I'm not going to answer..."

"Or just a parent?"

"It doesn't matter."

"This is outrageous."

"I hardly think so, Miss Scofield. Because these cases are only the tip of a very big iceberg. You make politically provocative statements in front of your students, you consort with extremists..."

"Attending a speech is not consorting with extremists..."
"If that's all you'd done, maybe you could make that case. But there's a consistent pattern of this sort of behavior, both in and outside of your classroom. Did you once advocate teaching Soul on Ice to your class?"

"I mentioned that I was reading it to one of my students and told him what I thought of it."

"Do you really think Eldridge Cleaver is appropriate reading for eighth graders?"

"For most eighth graders, no. That's why I didn't assign it."

"That implies some eighth graders."

"I didn't assign it. I discussed the book with one student, one time."

"Okay. Let's rephrase the question. Do you think it's appropriate to discuss with children a book about a black criminal who calls raping white women a "revolutionary act"?"

"Is it the black part that you object to?"

"Of course not."

"Then why would you mention it? You know Cleaver's black, I know he's black..."

"That's evading the point. Accusing us of racism won't help your case. After all, I have made a point of hiring Negro teachers for the past ten years in excess of recommended state guidelines."

"That is wonderful news. Almost as wonderful as your using the arcane phrase Negro in conversation with a black woman."

"Your conduct here today is wholly inappropriate and accusatory."

"Attitudes you would know a great deal about."

"Miss Scofield, we've tried being patient with you but you have defied all efforts to act in good faith. You're suspended for the next two weeks with pay while we review your case and consider long-term disciplinary action."

"I'm going to the teacher's union about this. I won't answer any more questions..."

"We've already taken care of that."

"What?"

"We've already consulted the teacher's union and considering the charges against you and your past history, they're giving us leeway to act as we see fit. They requested that we give you a chance to explain yourself before acting."

"You can't do that!"

"We already did. Now, I must admit that I'm not overly impressed with your conduct here today..."

"This meeting was a waste of time."

"I expected better from you, Miss Scofield. You'd been a hard-working woman - you'd shown that even a Negro...er, a black woman could be a capable educator, despite what some people think..."
"Anything else?"

"I just thought you'd be more concerned about being a credit to your race. I thought you were one of the good ones."

"Fuck you, honky."

Garnet didn't regret the conversation one bit. She'd endured condescension and occasional slurs for almost two years before then; only her students and her love for teaching prevented it from happening sooner. The only problem was that it pretty much closed the door on her career; she was formally banned from teaching not only in Chicago but all of Cook County. And in the world of education, whispers, rumors and informal blackballing spread farther than that.

It reinforced a lesson she'd known her whole life: that the North was just as racist as the South, even if it didn't codify its bigotry into laws and elect gnarl-mawed rednecks as leader. It simply insulted and demeaned you, day in and day out, by forcing you into substandard housing, providing you the most menial, dehumanizing work, labeling you a criminal and a troublemaker, occasionally lynching or killing you, then blaming you for not being able to instantly, easily transcend all these shortcomings and become rich and successful.

Garnet Scofield knew she had it better than many. Her father had immigrated to America from Trinidad in the '20s, spending a brief amount of time in Virginia before the cruel indignities of the Jim Crow South. He joined a slew of other blacks in moving north after World War I; unlike many, Jarvis Scofield found a relatively decent job working as a teacher (albeit a poorly paid one in an unofficially-segregated school), passing his love for literature and learning on to Garnet. He and Garnet's mother, a taciturn woman originally from Jamaica, would read their daughter the classics from an early age. She loved Jane Austen and William Shakespeare as much as any white girl, while retaining a window into her own heritage.

There wasn't much politics in Garnet's house growing up. Her dad avoided protests and activists and voted Republican in the era they were still, nominally, the Party of Lincoln. Only in 1964, faced with Barry Goldwater's repudiation of the Civil Rights Act, did he become a Democrat, and he could still never forgive Lyndon Johnson for his friendship and alliance with Southern segregationists like Richard Russell. But he kept these opinions largely to himself; Garnet had to learn them on her own.

She learned them through reading books, first works by liberal and American black authors explaining in calm, measured language why inequities existed; than more radical works by authors like Frantz Fanon, whose class-and-race based analyses of society seemed more convincing to Garnet's own experience. In 1967 she attended a rally held by Martin Luther King in support of fair housing practices, and saw that venerable Civil Rights leader pelted with stones and garbage by angry whites - all while Mayor Daley, a cretin disguised as a liberal, denied that racism existed in Chicago.

Despite witnessing this, and the million other horrors of that era - the race riots after King's death, the chaos at the Democratic National Convention, assassinations of King and Bobby Kennedy and the turmoil of Vietnam witnessed vicariously - Garnet strove to keep her head down. She received her teaching certificate in late 1968, shortly before Richard Nixon's election as President, and managed to teach for two years at a small, mostly-black school in the South Side of Chicago.

She was a good teacher. She loved her kids and gave energetic lectures on all manner of topics, though English and literature remained her subjects of choice. Her exotic West Indian accent gave her an especial allure to students tired of the grim flatness of Chicagoan patois. She could make
ghetto kids appreciate Ralph Ellison (whose Invisible Man had been reluctantly approved by the school board a year prior to her arrival) and Shakespeare in equal measure. But for all her virtues, she rubbed a lot of her colleagues and kids' parents the wrong way. Especially the white ones. Those who, beneath their patina of tolerance, couldn't stand to see an uppity Negro getting ahead in life. One who read Eldridge Cleaver and mourned Fred Hampton's murder by the FBI with an armband worn into class. Who would breach topics like Vietnam and social inequality with her class of students, far more curious than anyone had the right to expect. Who dated a man who, while hardly Sidney Poitier, worked hard at a factory and acted like white coworkers were his equals.

It was easy enough to provide real offenses, provided the definition be broadened to "independent thought" and "being black." The charge of misconduct, dreamed up by a Bircher faculty member and an angry parent, provided an artificial sweetener. Exeunt Garnet Scofield's respectable life.

Once she'd been formally fired, Garnet drifted into hazy indecision. She worked menial jobs that she hated while dressing in more African-styled clothing, styling her hair into an Afro, drifting in and out of different circles. Always reading, always learning the latest, cutting edge. She spent some time around Black Panthers but couldn't stand their macho swagger or recklessness. She found a slightly more mellow group of Black Power advocates, whom she associated with, dating their leader and debating the role of women in the movement, until they ran afoul of law enforcement and police raided their building. A shootout erupted, leaving two criminals and a policeman dead, and Garnet on the run, even though her own crime was merely being present.

Garnet slowly drifted across the country, winding up in DC where she bunked with a friend from college. It's there that she met Rose Quartz, bumping into her at an antiwar rally following the Kent State shootings. (Pearl, still with the FBI at the time, would not appear.) Like Pearl and Amethyst she remembered that first meeting with crisp, picture-perfect recollection, mostly because it involved a National Guardsman striking Rose with a rifle butt.

Her initial reaction was to laugh at the fat honky, likely a weekend protester who didn't care about society enough to protest until some kids got shot. But she saw the bewilderment and pain in Rose's eyes, refusing to fall despite the blow. And Garnet's compassion, and combativeness, and years of endless, pent-up anger overtook her.

"Hey turkey, why don't you pick on someone your own fucking size?" she had yelled at the Guardsman, stepping between them and Rose.

"Step back!" the Guardsman commanded, leveling his rifle.

"Yeah, of course you aim your rifle at a black woman," Garnet said angrily, defying him and presenting her body as a shield. "As if you lot aren't reprehensible enough, you're going to start massacring people a few blocks from the fucking White House."

A few photographs captured the tableaux of Garnet shouting defiance, with two Guardsmen's bayonets dramatically framed at the bottom of the picture. She was "unidentified black protester" in the Washington Post the next day, "Angry Negro" in more conservative papers. She admitted that she had liked the latter more.

"Please, don't hurt yourself," Rose begged Garnet, pulling on her arm.

"I'm fucking fed up," Garnet admitted. "If these honkies are gonna gun me down, might as well be here and now."
“Please don't hurt yourself on my account,” Rose insisted.

“I already told you…” Garnet started to protest.

“Let's be smart about this,” Rose said, pulling her back as the Guardsmen moved on to a more seemingly immediate threat - a pair of youths carrying a Vietcong flag. "There's no reason either of us needs to be hurt or killed in a peaceful protest. We'll find another way."

Everyone who knew Rose knew that she could persuasive and soothing and reasonable in a way few other human beings managed. Even hunted, angry Garnet, now the stereotyped Angry Negro, was reduced to second thoughts and nearly to tears. Feeling how stupid she was.

"My name is Garnet," she said.

"Rose," Rose responded.

"If you have any better ideas of fighting these PIGS!" - she yelled that last word - "then I'm all ears."

Rose smiled. "Let's go somewhere more private and we can talk it over."

As they left, the youths with the VC flag burst across the, shouting "Ho! Ho! Ho Chi Minh!" Unseen by Garnet and Rose, police responded to their invoking a dead communist by beating the shit out of them.

“I don't know how you ever put up with me," Pearl mused, sipping a glass of water. "I'm such a doofus..."

"Pearl, you're not and you know you're not," Garnet said. "We're not having this argument again."

Pearl sighed and laid back down. "I just wish that I could be as strong as you think I am. Strong like you."

Garnet sighed, not quite feeling in the mood to reassure Pearl again. "If you really aren't that strong, you certainly do a nice job pretending."

Pearl smiled, then winced as she felt a stab of pain. "Guess I'm not going to be much use if Jasper's friends get on our tail."

"Not unless you learn how to fire a gun while you're recovering." Pearl crinkled her face, indicating to Garnet that was out of the question.

"Fair enough," Garnet said, smiling. "Either way, you need to rest. Amethyst and I should be fine on our own. And if need be, I think Lapis can take care of herself."

"I hope you're right," Pearl groaned, turning over in bed. "I'm certainly not going to be much help like this."

Garnet reached over and fluffed Pearl's pillow. "Well, you rest. That's what's important for now."

Pearl smiled and clasped Garnet's hand appreciatively. The two shared a knowing grin, then Garnet exited the room.

She literally bumped into Peridot, who was standing outside.

"Oof! Hey, uh, Garnet," Peridot said blandly.
"Perry," Garnet responded.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there." Peridot fidgeted nervously at her shirt collar.

"Say, listen...Is it alright if I talk to Pearl?"

Garnet greeted this suggestion with a stony glower.

"Like..." Peridot sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry even to bring it up. And I'm sure that you don't want her talking to me. But..."

Garnet turned this over in her mind, knowing what her instinctive answer would be. It would make her feel uncomfortable, to say the very least. But then she thought about Pearl.

"She's resting, so try and be brief," Garnet said, nodding and moving aside. Peridot just smiled appreciatively and scampered nervously into Pearl's room.

Garnet could hear Peridot's nasal voice greeting Pearl and starting her impromptu inquisition. She still didn't entirely trust their new acquaintance, but her heart seemed to be in the right place. Besides, even if she didn't want Pearl talking to her, that was Pearl's decision to make. Not hers.

Trust. She was still a little disappointed that, after all this time, she, Pearl and Amethyst still needed to work on it. Though having two women added to the mix certainly complicated things.

But she had to trust that things would turn out right. She felt she didn't have a choice.

If Garnet couldn't rely on her friends when everyone else had let her down, the world was well and truly fucked.
October 1, 1975

Beach City, DV

Lapis watched Amethyst rummage through the beach house's record collection, looking for the good stuff.

"You've never heard Bobby Womack?" Amethyst said incredulously. "Man, he's the best!"

"I'm not really into that kind of music," Lapis admitted sheepishly.

Amethyst scowled at her. "That kind of music? Like, black people music? Come on, Lapis."

Lapis shrugged. "Sorry, dunno what I should say...I'm more into like rock and stuff like that."

Amethyst thought of making a thing about it, then shrugged in response and stuck the record in the turntable. "Won't hurt you to expand your horizons," Amethyst said.

Womack's cover of "Nobody Wants You When You're Down and Out" came on and Amethyst started snapping her fingers and shaking to the funky bass-and-guitar opening.

Lapis sat there and dangled her feet from a couch, looking thoughtfully as the music played on. She listened intently as Womack spelled out his woeful plight:

Then I began to fall so low

Didn't have a friend, nor no place to go

If I get my hands on a dollar again

I'm goin' to hold on to it until the eagle grins

Amethyst, still grooving next to her, watching a small smile of recognition and enjoyment slip onto Lapis's face. And she smiled in turn, glad to see the girl enjoying herself for a change.

"All right, Lappy Laz! Get down, girl!" she shouted, clapping her hands.

Lapis snickered. "This is as close as I can get," she said, wriggling her toes. Amethyst laughed in response.

"Whatever floats your boat, man," Amethyst said, throwing her hair back.

"Wait until you try Across 110th Street," Garnet offered as she walked through the living room and grabbed a drink.

And Peridot stood at the top of the stairs, watching them have fun. Looked at Amethyst dancing goofily, and at Lapis now shaking her head and thumping her feet to the music. Her smile was still guarded, yet seemed more sincerely happy than she'd been since their dinner a few nights earlier.

And Peridot felt a stab of jealousy. And regret.
Peridot had expected Pearl either to be reluctant to share her story as before, or too tired from her surgery to talk. Instead, she seemed almost thrilled to share her information now, speaking with remarkable animation despite being bedridden.

"...So Rose knew the people involved in the Media break-in?"

"Oh, yes!" Pearl sat up, beaming. "Once I heard they were looking for ways to expose the FBI's espionage programs, my ears perked up immediately. I found out that they were sending all the files from COINTELPRO to Media, Pennsylvania. Took me awhile to put the two together and take the leap but once I did, well, the rest is history."

"Amazing," Peridot said. "And the FBI never found out who did it?"

"Well, they had their suspicions," Pearl clarified. "And quite a few agents investigating it. But they still haven't arrested or charged anybody with the burglary."

She smiled with subdued pride. "Of course, I resigned shortly afterwards."

"Did you think they'd figure you out?" Peridot asked.

"Think? I don't know. I was afraid they would. I thought they might. There were only a few people who even knew about COINTELPRO and the Media location, so they might have narrowed it down eventually. Started asking questions how a small group of burglars might even have known to look at that location."

"But think?" She laid down and shifted onto her back, as if struck by a profound question, and stared at the ceiling.

"Gosh, that's a hard question to answer..."

"Either way, that's such an amazing story," Peridot gushed. "You basically threw away."

Now Pearl's smile vanished, and she seemed cross.

"I didn't think of it as amazing," Pearl said. "Nor something I wanted to do. I'm glad I did it, but...It's not easy to admit that you've been on the wrong side your whole life."

"I wouldn't say that," Peridot assured her. "You were on the right side the whole time. It's just...the people you worked for stopped being the right side after awhile."

"I could have done more, and sooner," Pearl insisted. "Probably should have."

"But you did what you did," Peridot said, eager to alleviate her guilt. "And that took courage."

"No...Well, maybe," Pearl said, considering it. "It took a lot of gall, at the very least."

Peridot seemed a little confused. Pearl had seemed so happy about telling her story a few minutes ago, so relieved to share it with someone. Now she was wallowing in regret. It didn't make a lick of sense to Peridot.

Then she realized for the first time how hard it must have been for Pearl to turn her back on her life's work, whether or not it was the right thing to do. Or that she could be proud of her actions without being proud of the fact that she had to be the one to do it.

"Anyway...Thanks for talking to me," Peridot said. She bit her lip and fiddled with her glasses,
dancing around what she'd want to ask.

"Had you...changed your mind?"

"About what?"

"About...testifying? Going on the record?" Peridot spit out those words like a poison, wincing in anticipation of Pearl's response.

You could hear a pin drop as Pearl registered the question and pondered how to answer. Then she felt another stab of pain in her abdomen.

"...I will seriously think about it," Pearl groaned. "A week or two ago I would have said no, but now..."

She turned away, staring out the window as a gull flew past, waiting for the pain to fade.

"Do you really think it will do any good?" she sighed, her hands squeezing the bed sheets tightly. "People are trying to kill us now. People are trying to kill you. I don't want anybody else to get hurt by this. Can you promise me that my testimony will make a difference?"

Another long silence as Peridot considered this. They heard the dim thumping of Amethyst and Lapis playing records down below.

"I can't guarantee that it will," Peridot admitted, sighing. "I can't guarantee that anything will come from this. Even with the press coverage and the hearings, we're still fighting an uphill battle against the President and the powers that be and I can't promise you anything will change. All I can guarantee is that people will hear your story, including the people who can make a difference. People will listen to you, Pearl White. And they'll know what the FBI did when you were there. And that's what important."

Still facing away from the girl, Pearl smiled despite herself. She couldn't help feeling a little proud of Peridot, and a little envious. But she still wasn't convinced.

"Let me think about it," she said. "But Peridot, if I don't want to appear in a session or on television...at least you can depose me. Get my testimony on the record."

Peridot felt a shiver of satisfaction and burst into a goofy grin.

"Wow! Thanks, Pearl!" she shouted. She moved forward to hug her, then remembered her friend's injury and backed off. And remembered how painful this experience had been for her, so much that she might appreciate a bear hug anyway.

Still need to master human interactions, Peridot scolded herself. Maybe some day.

"I'll let you rest now," Peridot said, worrying that she'd overstepped herself. "Thanks again. Oh, and Pearl?"

"Hmm?"

"In case I didn't tell you...you were a total badass at the hotel."

Pearl turned back towards Peridot and smiled gratefully.

"From what Garnet tells me, you were pretty badass too." She cast an approving glance down at
Peridot's bandaged hand, and Peridot blushed with pride.

"I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," she said.

"Story of my life," Pearl responded.

Then Pearl pulled her blanket around her shoulders and shut her eyes. And Peridot left, feeling a little bigger than she had before.

Now Peridot faced a human interaction she dreaded much more than Pearl.

Lapis, who was now clapping her hands along with Amethyst to an upbeat Rolling Stones song. Who looked actually happy and to be enjoying herself and, best of all, not thinking about all the horrible things she'd gone through. Which, Peridot imagined, was a rare event.

On one level, Peridot knew she needed to ask Lapis for more info on her CIA exploits. It was the whole reason that she'd gotten mixed up in this mess in the first place! But she knew it would be hard to bring her around to that topic again, especially after the awkwardness at the hotel.

At this point, though, it was more than that. Something even harder.

She really wanted to connect with Lapis like they'd done during that dinner. Where she'd been not the angry, bitter, burned-out victim of a heartless society, but a happy, open, beautiful young woman eager to make friends and enjoy life. The person she badly wanted to get to know and spend time around, as a person rather than a witness.

She just hoped it wasn't too late.

Right now, Peridot decided, she'd focus on the latter. Which was a bigger challenge.

And maybe, this time, she could make sure the evening had a happy ending. For both of them.

"Hi, Perry!"

Amethyst's voice cut through her thoughts.

"You comin' down to rock out with us?" Amethyst asked.

"We hit the mother load here," Lapis said, smiling with what Peridot registered as shyness. "Classic rock, modern stuff, even some jazz and classical records. So much great music here."

"I'm glad that Greg chose such a cool house to break into," Peridot said, slowly descending the staircase, unsure how comfortable or welcome she was.

"Eh, don't be like that! Just enjoy the moment!" Amethyst urged.

*Enjoy the moment.* Precisely what Peridot wasn't capable of doing.

"So Perry, I was telling Lapis a minute ago how she needs to do something with her hair. It looks super-burned out."

"We've already talked it over," Lapis said, averting her eyes from Peridot.

"I told her she really needs to dye her hair blonde," Amethyst said, grabbing a strand of Lapis's hair. "Wouldn't she look good as a blonde? I'd say she was amazing!"
Lapis giggled, and Peridot blushed as she considered the proposition.

"Well, blonde hair would certainly contrast nicely with her blue eyes and skin tone," Peridot said with her usual authoritiveness.

"Thanks, I guess," Lapis responded. "But it's like we talked about" (and Peridot felt curiously, irrationally happy that Lapis would even bring it up) "I was debating whether to dye it back to blue or not."

"Or at least, like, condition it or color it back to black or something," Amethyst insisted. "You've really let yourself go."

"I've been kinda busy," Lapis shrugged with her usual understatement.

"Ha, guess so!" Amethyst teased, ruffling Lapis's head. "You should totally go into town and get your hair done. Perry, you're from here, right?"

"Yes, I am," Peridot said, heart thumping as she sensed an opening.

"You know some place Lappy can get all jazzed up?"

"Please don't call me Lappy," Lapis muttered.

"Okay, some place Lapis can get all jazzed up?"

Peridot looked up, regarding her crazy blonde mess of a hairdo. And wondered if she was really the best person.

"Yeah, there's a place called Stanley's you'll need to check out. I used to go there all the time. It's how I maintain my distinctive good looks."

"That's cool," Lapis said, averting her eyes again. Then she said:

"Maybe you could come with me?"

She shot Peridot a shy, awkward smile. Peridot practically sprung into the air as she responded.

"Umm...sure. W-when would you like to go?"

"I mean, any time's fine," Lapis said. "It's a weekday so I'm sure it won't be super-crowded or anything..."

"That would be great!" Peridot said. Then she looked down at her now-disheveled clothes.

"Hmm...should probably get cleaned and dressed if we're going somewhere. I sorta smell like a gym sock."

"Same," Lapis chuckled. "We've got plenty of clothes to choose from."

"Will they even fit?" Peridot felt awkward enough staying in someone else's home without permission; wearing their clothes would be an extra level of creepy.

"Pearl made sure we packed some clothes with our stuff," Amethyst assured her. "I mean, we figured we'd be out of DC for awhile...Can't guarantee they'll fit, but worth looking at."

"Let me run up and take a shower," Lapis said. "I mean, I know you smell like a gym sock," she
teased Peridot, "but...I gotta admit, I don't shower as often as I should. Please we've been pretty active since the hotel..."

"Fine by me," Peridot assured her.

She brushed past Peridot, who felt a whoosh of air from her hair and involuntarily swooned as Lapis rushed upstairs and locked herself in the bathroom.

"So...You and Lapis...?" Amethyst asked cautiously.

"Me and Lapis what?" Peridot demanded. Amethyst grinned and crossed her arms.

"If you're suggesting that perhaps I have feelings towards her that, given our respective positions and the circumstances of our meeting would be highly inappropriate...Yes! Gaah! Why do I have to be this way?"

With Lapis out of earshot, Peridot had a mini freak out, pacing back and forth across the room. Amethyst looked on, caught between amusement and concern for the young woman.

"I've never been in love with anyone," Peridot ranted, "and never even really thought of love as something that's possible. But now!? With her!? How illogical! How Perry! Of course this nonsense happens to me!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Amethyst interrupted. "Let's hold up here a sec and think things through, all right? First of all, what's wrong with Lapis?"

"Everything!" Peridot insisted frantically. "Nothing! I mean, the whole reason I sought her out was because I wanted her as a witness. And I've already made her feel like...less than she should." She lowered her shoulders, her mania punctured by depression, her face overtaken by sadness and guilt.

"If everything's wrong with her," Amethyst wondered, "then why do you like her?"

Amethyst silently guided Peridot over towards a couch and sat her down. Peridot finally answered.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I just do. I thought she was just, like, this totally sullen, withdrawn woman who didn't want anyone to do with anything. Then I saw a little bit of why she was like that, and I felt bad for her. Then, I saw...I swear I saw that there was another person underneath all that. Someone who just needed somebody to love them. Some trace of who she was before...all of this happened to her."

And Peridot's face turned into a sad smile, her eyes beaming with affection.

"And who she was before was...incredible."

Amethyst nodded. Now she understood. She hadn't inquired too much into Lapis's background, and the girl acted like a wall towards her anyway. Despite their impromptu Mass the other day and their mutual affection for rocking out, she hadn't offered Amethyst much personal information.

If she'd even told Perry anything about herself despite their brief acquaintance...well, didn't that say enough?

"Perry, I'm no genius," Amethyst admitted. "And God knows I'm the last person to give relationship advice to anyone. I mean, I'm more the Queen of One-Night Stands than someone who gets a long-term partner."
Peridot snorted. "I'm sorry," she apologized quickly.

"It's cool," Amethyst said, waving away her concern. "I'm pretty comfortable with that part of who I am. Anyway, yeah, I'm not exactly Marina Zayats here. But I know...if you feel strongly about somebody...like, why deny it? Maybe you and Lapis are meant for each other. Maybe you’ll go out together and tear each other's throats out with your teeth over dinner. Although...I really doubt it, just from watching you two here."

"Thanks," Perry said as Amethyst put a hand on her shoulder. "It's just...There are so many ways I can go wrong, I don't know where to start."

"My suggestion? Just treat her as a person."

Peridot stared at Amethyst for a long moment, considering her words and what they really meant. It seemed so simple to say, yet so hard to do.

So Peridot nodded. "I'll try," she offered uncertainly.

"That's all you can do, man," Amethyst said, patting her on the back before standing book. "Now, are you sure you don't wanna rock out to some Stones before you leave?"

"Probably better for me to start getting ready," Peridot said. "See if there's any clothes that might actually fit me and not, you know, totally cramp my style."

"And what a style to cramp!" Amethyst laughed, before going over and grabbing another record off the shelf. "Ooh, Bad Company! I don't have this one."

Peridot smiled, filled with warmth and hope.

"Amethyst...thanks."

"Any time, Perry," Amethyst said as she fit the vinyl into the turntable.

Peridot went upstairs as the sounds of "Can't Get Enough" started playing downstairs. She stopped by the bathroom door for a moment, listening to Lapis humming in the shower, and let out a heartsick sigh.

*Just do what Amethyst said, Peridot assured herself. Treat Lapis as a person. Not as an informant or a witness or a thing with baggage. Just as a person. You can do that, right?*

She thought back to her conversation with Pearl, and wondered.

*Still need to master human interactions, Peridot thought again. Why not today?*
Lapis sat back in the barber's chair, still weighing her options. And a little annoyed that she was thinking about her hair at all.

Stanley, the barber, examined Lapis's hair. He was bald and middle-aged, wearing an odd-looking peach leisure suit, yet had the energy and demeanor of a much younger man.

"Yes, it is a mess," Stanley said.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"The roots are all burnt out, the natural color is faded and the blue dye you used is...well, it's barely there any more, just a few awkward, ugly streaks. No offense, but...you haven't really been taking care of your hair, have you?"

"I've had better things to do," Lapis snapped.

"What could be more important than hair?" Stanley gasped. Lapis scowled at him, wanted to say something cutting about his shiny dome, then realized it wouldn't serve a purpose.

"Do you think you'd need to color it?" Lapis asked, crisp and businesslike. "I mean, let's just say I wanted to go back to my natural color."

"That would be easiest way to fix it. I think it would take a prolonged treatment of shampoos and conditioners and all kinds of delicate to bring your hair back to its full glory."

"Sure," Lapis said, feeling a little annoyed as she felt Stanley pull up the hair around her neck.

"I didn't notice your tattoo. It's beautiful! I can see how you'd want blue hair to go along with it."

Lapis smirked. "Thanks. I mean, I'm not really happy with it, but..."

"Don't know why that didn't occur to me," Stanley continued, positively gushing now. "I hadn't even thought about it, but...Lapis Lazuli? Genius! No wonder you have such a wonderful name."

"Oh, it's wonderful all right," Lapis snarked, rolling her eyes and thinking of all the times she'd wished she was named Linda or Betty or Anne or something not weird and Latin.

Lapis winced, not sure she had the will or interest to do a prolonged anything just for the sake of her hair. She wanted to look nice today, and see how things went from there.
"All right, just...make it shine," Lapis said. "Like, normal. If you can get the dye and crud out of my hair, great. If you need to color it, color it. Just, make sure it looks natural."

"Oh, that's my specialty," Stanley said, reaching for his shampoo. "You'll look more natural than you did the day you were born. Be a brand new you."

Lapis thought that sounded a little ridiculous, but didn't say anything.

As Stanley went to work, Lapis closed her eyes and thought about the day ahead. About Peridot. About all the awkwardness they'd experienced and whether it was possible to move past it, to salvage something of their relationship.

She still hadn't figured out Peridot, a mess of nerves and neuroses and strange, inexplicable cuteness. She still wanted to like her, maybe even to love her, though that was probably thinking too far ahead at this point. To believe that she liked Lapis as a person. But she still couldn't shake the thought that Peridot was just using her.

Like everyone else.

No, Lapis told herself, Peridot is different. She's too...well, if nothing else she's full of herself. She likes to talk and to show that she knows everything. She couldn't hide a secret or a devious scheme for more than a minute without blurtting it out to everyone.

That's part of why Lapis liked her so much. Or thought she liked her.

Let's just try having fun today and see how it goes. That shouldn't be too hard, right? It'll be a new experience.

A New Experience for a New Lapis.

And she smiled, daring to believe for a moment that such a thing might be possible.

Peridot gasped when Lapis stepped out of the barbershop. Her jaw practically hit the boardwalk.

"That bad, huh?" Lapis joked.

She was wearing a nice tan-and-brown peasant blouse with jeans - not quite her size, a little snug, but still looking very nice on her. And her hair, instead of washed-out and faded now shone a radiant jet-black in the sun.

It made Peridot feel more self-conscious about her own looks. She was wearing a black vest that either Pearl or Garnet had brought along, along with a white shirt and bow tie, all of which made her look like a bartender in an old Western. And all she'd done with her hair was to try slicking it down so that it resembled a human appearance.

"Lapis Lazuli, you are truly a vision," Peridot said, clasping her hands together and looking in her friend's eyes. Lapis was struck by Peridot's utter, unforced sincerity and giggled.

"Well, I'm glad you like it," she responded. "Just think of me as the New Lapis Lazuli, if it's easier. Or at least the one who'll stick around for today."

She looked Peridot up and down and stifled a laugh. "Of course, your style is pretty, erm, unique too..."
"None of the t-shirts or dresses Pearl and the rest brought along fit me!" Peridot wailed. "This is all they had."

"It's very you," Lapis teased, playing with Peridot's bow tie.

"I assure you it is not," Peridot huffed, still not getting it.

"That's a shame, because...I think you look cute."

And Peridot practically melted, there on the spot. She stammered incoherently for a moment, then cleared her throat and finally managed to form words, in her usual faux-officious manner, folding her hands nervously behind her back.

"I also would like to say that the New Lapis Lazuli is...even more beautiful than the one I'd been acquainted with before."

Lapis giggled. "You don't have to talk like an accountant all the time," she teased, causing Peridot to blush.

"It's the result of spending too much time around Senators," Peridot assured her.

"Well, you're not in Washington now," Lapis said, offering Peridot her arm. "We're on your turf. Care to show a lady around?"

Peridot smiled and obliged her friend.

It was still warm enough to pass for summer, though the lack of tourists marked it otherwise. The smell of sand and salt air mingled with rancid french fry grease and the dim tingle of saltwater taffy.

It was a fun day, as Peridot enjoyed escorting her lady friend around Beach City. They walked along the boardwalk, grabbed hot dogs and fries for lunch and chatted. The moment was ruined when a seagull flew up and stole one of Peridot's fries, prompting the little blonde into an angry shouting match with a bird. Lapis couldn't help laughing.

Peridot made her laugh so much. She was so silly, so ridiculous. So cute. And that meant a lot, because not many people could do that.

"I assume if we go see a movie, there won't be any birds in the theater," Peridot grumbled.

"I am not watching Jaws again," Lapis said huffily.

"What's Jaws?" Peridot asked. And Lapis looked at her as if she were a Martian.

"Oh...the shark movie! Well, I haven't seen it myself, but...everyone assures me that it's, um, quite excellent."

"It was pretty scary...the first six hundred times," Lapis said.

"Well, I think this theater shows first run movies anyway," Peridot commented.

The pickings were pretty slim, but they ended up watching a silly teen movie. Which was cheesy and not at all similar to either girl's high school experiences, but a decent waste of a few hours.

"It's like people who make these movies have never been to high school," Peridot complained as they exited.
"I know, right?" Lapis agreed. "Like, were Hollywood screenwriters born at age 40 or what?"

"Everything is so forced into cliques and types. Such a cliche. I knew plenty of nerds who hung out with the jocks, and vice versa. The head cheerleader at my school dated the president of the chess club! It's like Hollywood just has a silly checklist of conventions they go through before making these movies, without actually bothering to consider what kids act or feel like?"

"Right?" Lapis agreed, relieved that she wasn't only one who felt this way! "And there are never any kids in those movies who are..."

Lapis hesitated before saying the word. She bit down on it, swallowed and instead something else came out:

"Like us."

Without thinking, Peridot grabbed Lapis's hand and held it tight. Lapis blushed and felt a sudden rush of warmth to her cheeks. They saw an older man walk past and shake his head in disapproval, but moved on without saying anything.

Peridot felt a twinge of guilt and embarrassment. But she looked at Lapis, shooting her a shy, reassuring smile, and beat down her feelings. She was still coming to terms with being gay, wondering what it would mean to her colleagues and her friends and her family if they knew, afraid of what might happen. But she could at least be honest with herself. And with Lapis.

And so she only gripped the girl's hand harder.

"Some people don't understand," Peridot said quietly. "Refuse to understand. That we're people like them and have thoughts and feelings too."

"Try growing up Catholic and gay," Lapis said, still acting a bit ashamed to use the word. "But that shouldn't matter now."

Peridot took a deep, heavy breath, sensing how much it hurt Lapis to talk about the topic. She hadn't felt comparable pain because she didn't know herself growing up. And in that sense, could only guess what it meant for Lapis. Peridot had always just thought she was a loser who couldn't attract boys.

"Can I ask...? If it's not too personal?" Peridot said as they started walking down the boardwalk.

"I'd rather answer personal questions then...other questions right now," Lapis assured her, looking down at her feet.

"How did you know? I mean, I guess that's the most cliched question to ask a gay person, but..."

"I never really knew until I met someone in college," Lapis admitted. "There was a girl at a party one day and it just clicked."

"Ahh," Peridot nodded in understanding. She knew that

"I mean, if you think about it, it's pretty funny," Lapis said, though her voice seemed more bitter than amused. "Part of the reason I'm in this mess is that I didn't want to be gay, and I lied to myself, and tried to make myself normal, and...look where it got me."

They stayed silent for a moment, walking down the boardwalk with their hands gripped tight. Peridot absorbed her friend's sorrow.
"You have nothing to be ashamed of," Peridot assured her friend. "Nothing at all."

"If you only knew," Lapis said mysteriously, her features darkening. But she managed to force a smile on her face for Peridot's sake.

"It's too early for dinner," Peridot said. "We still have plenty of time before need to head back."

"What do you wanna do?" Lapis asked, her freshly-dyed hair ruffled in a sudden breeze.

*My God, she is beautiful,* Peridot thought, a quiet sigh escaping her throat. *And how can something so beautiful possibly be wrong?*

"Right now?" Peridot said. "All I want is to...is to spend time with you."

"You are a romantic," Lapis said. Then she pulled Peridot close and planted a kiss on her forehead. Peridot blushed, then smiled. She resisted the urge to grab Lapis and jam her tongue down the girl's throat right then and there. Instead, she looked away sheepishly and clutched her hand tighter.

They spent the afternoon playing ring toss and trying an arcade game, faring badly at both. They found a clothing store and bought new sundresses with some money Garnet had lent them. Another store, and Lapis brought a big, goofy sun hat.

"Hey Perry!" Peridot heard a familiar voice calling out and saw Jamie the mailman approaching them.

Peridot yelped and broke her hand away from Lapis. Lapis shot her a glare, more sad than angry.

"How's the DC big shot doing, huh? You keeping Senator Dewey in line?"

"Hi Jamie! No, I'm taking some time off from work. Pretty stressful right now, you know. All this spy business..."

"Totally understand," Jamie said.

"How's the acting career going?" Peridot asked.

"It's...going," Jamie mused. "Ronaldo was trying to get a film together again. He apparently received some grant money from the state, but he's too busy worrying about CIA mind control beams to actually shoot anything."

"Is that what Greg was talking about?" Peridot hooted. "Oh, man! Can't believe that blockhead is still talking about those damn alien conspiracies?"

"I mean, to be fair, these days...who knows?" Jamie shrugged.

"Ronaldo's always been into that kind of weird stuff," Peridot told Lapis. Who had crossed her arms and looked glumly out past the boardwalk.

"Umm, are you gonna introduce me to your friend?" Jamie asked. "Jamie Cordero. I deliver mail, and occasionally a performance."

"Lapis," Lapis said, reluctantly shaking his head. "Lapis Lazuli."

"That's a very pretty name," he said. "And you are a very pretty girl."
Lapis sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Don't try the Romeo and Juliet stuff on her, Jamie," Peridot warned. "You won't get anywhere."

"Oh, well...I'm sorry," Jamie apologized, growing flustered. "I meant it as a complement."

"I don't like people to comment on my looks," Lapis snapped. Then she relented a little, realizing that he wasn't being malicious or insulting.

"It's not your fault, it's just..."

Jamie hung his head, a bit angry at himself.

"I'm sure you're a wonderful person, too," Jamie said. "I didn't mean..."

"You didn't make the best first impression," Lapis admitted. "So, let's try again."

"Okay," Jamie said, sighing melodramatically before taking a deep breath and screwing an exaggerated smile on his face.

Lapis burst out laughing. "Okay, I think I liked unwittingly chauvinist Jamie more than this guy," she said. Jamie smirked, trying to take her comment in good humor.

"Jamie can be an acquired taste," Peridot said to Lapis. "But he's a good guy. We've known each other for, jeez, how long?"

"My brother went to school with Peridot, so we're pretty well-acquainted."

"Went to school with?" Peridot offered. "He was my first kiss!"

Lapis's eyes goggled at this information. And Jamie laughed.

"Man, I'm sure he'd love to remember that."

"Well, it was his idea, not mine," Peridot fumed. "What's Brad up to these days?"

"Still trying to be a teacher, I guess. He moved to the state capital and is doing one of those grad school programs."

"That's cool. Never saw him as the teaching type, but...I guess that's high school for you."

"Hmm." Jamie nodded. "Well, it was really nice meeting you, Lapis," he said. "And Peridot, if you're gonna be in town long we should catch up."

"Yeah, why not?" Peridot said, beaming at him. "I don't get to see any of my Beach City friends any more. Of course, you could always come to the Capitol..."

"Sadly, the DC theater scene is dismal," Jamie pronounced.

"Whereas it's thriving in Delmarva," Peridot teased.

"Anyway, I've gotta run but...nice to see you," Jamie said. He bit his lip, turning over something in his mind.

"And Peridot...I'm glad to see you looking so...happy."

Peridot shot him another smile.
"Thanks, Jamie. And good luck with the movie."

"Yeah, right," Jamie said, rolling his eyes and walking away.

"He tries to be a good guy," Peridot said, apologizing for her friend. "He's a bit of a dork, but once you get to know him..."

"Hm." Lapis wasn't impressed. Then she decided to adopt a lighter approach.

"Is anyone in Beach City not a dork?"

"That's for me to know," Peridot said, "and you to find out!"

"So, what's this kissing story?" Lapis said. And Peridot blanched and backed away, with exaggerated terror.

"That bad, huh?" Lapis asked, feeling a tinge of remorse. "You don't have to tell me, it just seemed..."

"Ehh...Jamie's brother just thought I was cute and we went to a dance together junior year. And he decided the best way to end an awkward, unpleasant evening to makeout."

"Oh, wow."

"Typical teenager stuff," Peridot shrugged. "We kissed and nothing happened after that. I don't know if we talked for the rest of the year."

"What kind of kisser was he?" Lapis asked, leaning in. So close that Peridot could see the golden sparkle in her eyes and the tiny, barely-visible freckles on Lapis's nose and cheeks. So close that she had to stop herself from swooning.

"Like kissing a wet noodle," Peridot admitted, her face blanching in disgust. And Lapis burst out laughing.

"Could be worse," she said. "He could have grabbed you."

"He was too much of a gentleman to do that, thank God!"

By the time they reached the end of the boardwalk, they were holding hands again.


Finally the Sun started setting over the beach, and the air started to chill. Peridot and Lapis watched admiringly as the lights along the boardwalk and pier started to illuminate the dusky sky. Then they began the long, sandy walk back to the beach house.

"So, there's something I've wanted to ask you all day," Lapis admitted. "Kinda random, but..."

"Go ahead," Peridot said. "Can't be more embarrassing than my Brad Cordero story."

"Maybe," Lapis said. "What kind of music do you like?"

"Music? I don't really listen to much music."

"Really?" Lapis said in flat disbelief.

"I don't know a Beatle from a Beach Boy from a Rolling Stone," Peridot admitted. "I listen to some
"old-timey stuff like Buddy Holly, I guess. Got it from my parents. My dad loved Chubby Checker and the Platters. And I have some jazz and classical records at home."

"Oh, really?" Lapis said.

"Dork music," Peridot muttered, anticipating a mockery she inevitably got.

"Not at all," Lapis said. "I love classical music. Guess I love all music, really. Just depends on my mood. Any composers you really like?"

"Vivaldi, the Four Seasons. I guess that's the cliche answer, but it really helps me think and reflect when I'm trying to get work done."

"I'm more into Mozart and Bach, I guess," Lapis said. "But really, I'll listen to just about anything."

"As long as you don't like Mahler," Peridot grumbled. And they shared a nerd laugh at the German's expense.

"I used to paint a lot when I was in college," Lapis said wistfully, admiring the sunset. "But I guess I fell out of the habit. It's so hard to find beauty in life when you're doing ugly things all the time."

Peridot didn't know how to respond to that. She wished Lapis trusted her to open up about it rather than make vague, troubling allusions. But she guessed that was still a long way away. At least today seemed like a pretty big step in the right direction.

"There's an art supply store in town," Peridot offered. "It's not at the boardwalk, but...I mean, if you wanted we get you some supplies."

"Really?" Lapis looked highly skeptical.

"Why not?" Peridot said. "I mean, painting beats sitting around doing nothing all day. Plus, I don't like to see talent go to waste."

Lapis smiled again, but this smile seemed sad and wistful. Almost pitying.

"I don't think so," she said, with a dismissiveness that made Peridot's heart sink.

The two walked along the surf together, not saying anything for several minutes after that.

Finally, Lapis spoke up:

"Today has been incredible, Perry."

"Yeah?" Peridot said. Lapis stared straight ahead as they walked, struggling with something.

"Yeah. It's been all kinds of fun! I never thought I could just spend time like that again. It's been so long since...Since I've had that."

Peridot was struck by how flat and lifeless her comments seemed. Like all her previous happiness had drained away. Like she was making a cool, clinical assessment of something she'd witnessed, rather than expressing her own feelings.

"And I really like you," she continued, shooting Peridot the briefest of glances before looking down at the sand.

"I...I feel the same way," Peridot muttered. She didn't say more, waiting for a shoe to drop.
Then it came, and it was devastating:

"I just don't want you to get used to the idea."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm trouble. I'm not somebody you can like without getting hurt. I mean, you've already..." And she gestured to Peridot's bandaged hand.

Peridot unconsciously grasped at her injury, felt a twinge of pain. She'd barely thought about it all day until Lapis mentioned it. She wanted to say that she'd gladly do it again, take a thousand bullets, if it meant keeping Lapis safe and in her life.

But she kept silent and let Lapis talk on.

"And I've already hurt so many people. Ruined people's lives. People have **died** because of me, Peridot. Do you know what that feels like? Do you know how awful I feel waking up every day, knowing that?"

Peridot felt tears welling up in her own eyes, watching her friend go to pieces. She didn't know what to say.

"I'm not a good person," Lapis continued, as a tear ran down her cheek. "I've done so many things...I've sinned. I've hurt people. I've made the world a worse place. And it gets worse every minute I'm in it."

Peridot reached out and grabbed Lapis's hand. Then caught a glimpse at her wrist. And gasped. Barely visible in the twilight, a deep red scar which Peridot hadn't noticed before.

Lapis pulled her hand away and turned towards the surf, dropping her shopping bags and hugging herself as the tide came in around her feet.

Peridot realized that she'd have to tread very carefully to avoid scaring her off.

"Lapis..." she started, putting a hand on her friend's shoulder. Lapis was now audibly sobbing.

"Lapis...I don't know what you've done before," Peridot said. "And I have to admit...I **want** to know."

"I'm sure you do," Lapis muttered.

"What does **that** mean?" Peridot asked.

Lapis gave a wry, angry chuckle. "I'll be your big catch, right?" she said, turning towards Peridot, her face tearful and bitter. "You'll get me to testify so you and your Senator can be big heroes. And then Peridot Khoury will become a Washington big shot! Your name will be in headlines and on TV and everyone will now who you are! And once that's done, you won't care about poor, broken, hurt, evil Lapis Lazuli ever again."

Peridot felt like she'd been slapped in the face. But she recognized that Lapis was deliberately trying to drive her away. Though Lapis describing herself as evil...she couldn't even fathom it.

"That is not remotely true," Peridot said, struggling to keep her voice calm. "Okay, maybe...look, let's be honest here. I contacted you in hopes that you'd become a witness for me. Maybe part of me
still hopes that you will. A big part of me. It's my job, and it's something important."

"At least you're honest," Lapis huffed.

"But it's not why I spent today with you!" Peridot shouted. She couldn't control herself anymore. And maybe shouting was the only way to get through to Lapis.

"If I just thought of you like that, I'd just like, get you put in protective custody or something. I don't go shopping for dresses and watch a movie with someone who's just a witness. I don't eat hot dogs and chase seagulls and...and...hold hands with someone I don't care about. I don't spend a whole day feeling like my whole life finally has meaning and purpose and that I have the *tiniest* chance of feeling whole and not being alone for the rest of my life for somebody I only think is a witness."

She grabbed Lapis and turned her around with surprising force. Lapis gasped and the two stared into each other's eyes. Peridot again marveled at the twinkling in Lapis's irises, and felt her mouth growing dry.

"Lapis...you *mean* something to me. As a person. As a friend. As a...What I'm trying to say is..."

There was a four letter word she was desperately trying to form, but her tongue and brain wouldn't cooperate. Her head was spinning too fast.

"Anyway...maybe everything you told me is true. But..." She thought back to what Lapis had said earlier, and the faintest grin flickered across her face.

"All that was...the Old Lapis Lazuli. What I saw today was the New Lapis Lazuli, remember? But, you know what? I like both of them. I..."

Her tongue froze and betrayed her. She still couldn't say "Love."

Why was that so hard? Why did she have to be such an awkward, bumbling clod?

Instead, she just held Lapis close, her lips trembling, her eyes darting nervously around. Visibly stumbling over her own thoughts, not giving Lapis a chance to escape or a reason to believe her. Hoping her words would sink in.

Until Lapis grabbed Peridot. Pulled her in close.

And kissed her. On the lips. With her tongue.

A deep, long, lingering kiss as the surf crashed around their legs. Decidedly *not* like kissing a wet noodle.

And Peridot had never felt happier in her entire life.

Chapter End Notes

So far, this chapter has been the most fun to write. I love giving the characters a chance to let their hair down and just enjoy each other's company. While I'm not a hardcore shipper of any kind, I do like giving characters who have little enough peace of mind in canon (poor, poor Lapis; please come home soon!) a moment of happiness.
October 1, 1975

Beach City, DV

The clock edged past eleven and Lapis couldn't sleep, again. She lay in bed on her side, with the blanket bunched between her legs, one hand snagged in her hair. Peridot was sound asleep next to her, her blonde hair a mess and her arms draped snugly around Lapis's midriff.

Their day had been a mixture of fun and awkwardness, just like everything between them. It ended with the two girls rushing upstairs after everyone had gone to bed, struggling to keep quiet even though Greg was clearly awake on the couch watching them come in, and even though Peridot inevitably tripped over something left in the middle of the floor and muttered something about a clod as she always did.

They ran upstairs into the room, giggling at their own naughtiness. Kissing hungrily and fumbling awkwardly and pulling off each other's clothes before falling into bed together, only for Peridot to realize she had no clue what she was doing and to freak out again. Until Lapis calmed her down and took charge and treated Peridot, tenderly and lovingly, to the first sexual experience of her life.

Peridot seemed both overwhelmed and deeply satisfied by the experience, laying there for several minutes until her breathing slowed and the feelings inside her slowly subsided, then starting to kiss Lapis on the shoulders and stroke her skin and hair to reciprocate. Lapis sighed and helped the blonde along, guiding Peridot's hand in between her legs until she got the hang of it. And all seemed well, until Lapis realized something that terrified her, that wrecked any chance she'd remember the balance of the day fondly.

She couldn't feel a thing.

Eventually she made Peridot stop, pretending that she'd been satisfied and trying not to cry or completely lose control of herself. Peridot, for once, believed her and fell asleep soundly, oblivious to her lover's discomfort.

And Lapis's world collapsed again.

Every step forward she took was so fragile, so easily crushed. All day she'd enjoyed just spending time with Peridot so much that she thought everything was okay. When she had her attack of self-doubt on the beach, Peridot made it clear that Lapis's problems didn't matter to her. And she hoped that she might finally have found something that she couldn't wreck.

Until the moment of truth came, and Lapis didn't. Suddenly her thoughts turned black, her hopes crumbled to dust. Her wonderful day ended a failure.
Like everything Lapis did.

Maybe something was wrong with her. Physically, emotionally, everywhere. Maybe everything.

Something inside her was broken. Probably forever. And even love - even the sincerity and affection of someone like Peridot - couldn't fix it.

Instead of crying, Lapis just stared at the wall and out the window again. She felt the worst thoughts imaginable coursing through her mind. And then took a deep breath and turned over, regarding sleepy Peridot.

Feeling her soft, warm skin. Her soft, frazzled blonde hair which smelled like perfumed straw. The little fleshy details, like the tiny, unhealed cuts on her hand or a good-sized mole under her right breast, discoverable by only the most intimate acquaintance. Perhaps most of all, the deeply contented look on her sleeping face, suggesting a simple happiness she'd never known.

At least I know I can make somebody else happy, Lapis told herself, brushing a strand of Peridot's hair behind her ear. And I was honest with myself, for once. Maybe someday soon, I'll be honest with Peridot too.

And Lapis tried taking comfort in that, as best she could.

Turning back over on her side, she grabbed one of Peridot's hands and kissed it softly. Peridot stirred briefly, but didn't wake up. Once she stopped, Lapis carefully laid Peridot's hand against her own heart, laid back and closed her eyes.

After a few more restless minutes, she finally fell asleep.

Washington, DC

Bismuth kept her shop open late, waiting for Chris to come home from the restaurant. This meant that she had to deal with the usual, pain-in-the-ass customers who sneaked in under cover of darkness, like Angry Mike, a local troublemaker who kept trying to convince her that he'd somehow obtained Mike Souchak's golf clubs.

"These are the very clubs Souchak used to win the Motor City Open in August 1959!" he'd rant, waving a five-iron in Bismuth's face.

"Do you have a certificate of authentication?" Bismuth asked, annoyed and angry and wishing he'd fuck off.

"Fuck you, bitch!" he shouted, brandishing his club. "I don't need certificate of authentification!" he mispronounced. "I'm offering you these damn things."

Bismuth groaned and fixed a steely glare on her irate customer. Meanwhile, her left hand felt underneath the desk to make sure her shotgun was there.

"Okay, Mike," she said, as calmly as circumstances allowed. "One, no one gives a shit about Mike Souchak! He was a decent golfer back in the day but I guarantee you, no one's gonna know who the hell he is. If you were selling Arnold Palmer's clubs, and you could authenticate them, maybe you'd get something."

"But..."
"Two, take a look at these clubs! These are brand spanking new and never been used by anyone, be they PGA Pro, Grandpa Joe or your sorry ass. You're not only a phony, you're a bad, lazy one. If you want to pawn these things, I'll give $30 for them. That's it. And I feel like that's generous with all the shit you're giving me about it."

Bismuth stared down Mike for a long moment, until the troublemaker broke eye contact. He grunted, muttered that she was a "bitch" under his breath and stalked out of the store.

"Next time I see you, you're gonna be sorry," Mike warned.

"Yeah, yeah, have a nice night, Mike," she said, tapping her shotgun. As a pawn shop owner she was used to threats from just about everyone, and learned to brush them off. Still, she covertly kept Mike covered until he'd closed the door behind him.

She relaxed slightly and muttered a curse under her breath. It was 11:00, and Chris still wasn't home. That didn't concern her too much - some nights he worked through midnight - but she was tired and had a long day and wanted to shut down. She'd bawl Chris later.

She ducked under the desk, looking for the keys to lock up. And heard the door jingle open.

"Mike, what did I tell you...?" she began.

She looked up. And instead of Mike, she saw a short white woman in dress clothes and a thin blue jacket entering the store.

She bristled, immediately on guard about her strange visitor.

"Who are you supposed to be, some kinda pixie?" Bismuth asked.

"That's no way to talk about a customer!" the woman said in a cheerful English accent. "Sorry to bother you so late but I need to see if Sapphire is in."

Bismuth rolled her eyes. Sapphire was in the back doing her usual thing, but it was closing time and this woman needed to fuck off right now.

"Sorry, it's too late..."

"I know she's here," Aquamarine interrupted. She kept smiling, but her eyes betrayed a hidden malice that chilled Bismuth's blood. "Just need to see her really quick. Urgent. Tell her...I'm an old friend."

Bismuth thought about pulling her gun, but something told her to obey her visitor. Instead of challenging her, she just nodded and stood up.

"I'll see if she's in back," Bismuth muttered, disappearing behind the beaded curtain.

Aquamarine stood around outside humming atonally, looking at the strange bric-a-brac and radical signage decorating Bismuth's store. She saw the television set in the far corner was playing what looked like *The Rockford Files*. She scowled and changed the dial until she saw Glenda Jackson playing Queen Elizabeth, and grinned with satisfaction.

After a moment, Bismuth reappeared.

"Sapphire's not able to see anyone right now," she said curtly. Aquamarine's expression remained unchanged.
"I don't think you understand," Aquamarine said. "I need to see Sapphire."

"You don't understand," Bismuth retorted. "You have to come back another time. It's too late to get your fortune told..."

Aquamarine shook her head, her cheerfulness replaced with pity.

"Poor child," she said. "Think you're tough with your big mouth and your gun. Well, you're not dealing with some crank off the street, my dear. I'll give you one more chance. Please let me see Sapphire."

Bismuth's body bristled with fear and anger. She wasn't sure what the little woman was telling her, exactly, but she would not tolerate a threat. Least of all in her own store.

"Get out of my fucking store," she growled, pulling her shotgun over the counter.

"Should have known you'd say that," Aquamarine sighed. She reached into her coat and pulled out a slender black object...

Bismuth bolted to her feet and aimed the shotgun at Aquamarine. She fired both barrels, one smashing into the floor, the other blowing the front door open.

With her heart racing with adrenaline, her ears ringing from the shots, Bismuth slowly peered over the counter.

No sign of Aquamarine. Somehow she'd missed.

Cursing herself, trembling with anxiety, Bismuth cracked open the shaft and discarded the empty shells. Before she could reload, she looked up and saw Aquamarine had hopped up on the desk, with her black rod in hand.

Bismuth felt an electrical jolt surge through her heart. Before she could scream, she collapsed to the ground.

Sapphire sat in the middle of her usual room, eyes closed, deep in meditation. A few candles offered dim orange light and fragrant flower scents.

"I've been expecting you," Sapphire muttered as Aquamarine entered.

"Should have told your friend," Aquamarine said, greeting her like an old acquaintance.

Sapphire shrugged. "What will be, will be."

"I must admit that your profound indifference to everything, even your own life, impresses me much more than it should," Aquamarine said, drawing closer. "What is it like to see the future, I wonder? Must be a great gift."

"Hmm. Sometimes it's a gift, sometimes it's a curse. It depends on what I see."

"Presumably that's how you know all of your books will be best sellers."

"That and trade publications," Sapphire said, a wry smile slipping across her face.

Aquamarine grinned as she stood over Sapphire.
"So, you know why I'm here?"

"You're looking for information on the Crystal Gems."

"The Crystal Gems?" Aquamarine laughed. "Is that what they're calling themselves? Catchy, I'll admit. Well, I suppose I'll have to deal with the lot to reach Ms. White and Ms. Lazuli."

"I cannot tell you anything," Sapphire said. "I only know Garnet and Amethyst. I do not know Pearl, nor their two newest companions."

"Oh come now," Aquamarine scoffed. "You know everything. You see all!" Her voice rose in sarcastic mockery. Then her countenance shifted to anger.

"Don't pull this bullshit with me. Where are they."

"Hmm. I predict that you will not find the information you're looking for here."

"Oh, really?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Aquamarine saw someone in the shadows.

"It's best not to doubt the Fates," Sapphire said mysteriously.

Before Aquamarine could move, Ruby bolted forward with an angry growl and tackled her. The two scuffled for a moment as Sapphire sat indifferently, lapsing back into her meditation pose.

Aquamarine managed to slip free of the bodyguard and rise to her feet. She struck at Ruby, who responded by kicking Aquamarine in her midsection. The short agent fell backwards, gasping for air, and collapsed against the wall. Ruby stood up and moved closer.

"Want some more, bitch?" Ruby growled. She reached into her belt and started drawing a dagger.

"Enough games," Aquamarine barked. She stood back up, straightened out her outfit, then pulled out the black rod again.

Ruby let out a roar and attacked her again.

This time, Aquamarine ducked and stuck her prod into Ruby's gut. She turned it on full blast and the bodyguard fell backwards, groaning and twitching as electricity coursed through her.

Sapphire opened her eyes and gasped, but remained still, trying to maintain her stoic countenance. She hadn't foreseen this happening.

Aquamarine brushed a strand of hair from her eyes and straightened out her coat again. She saw Ruby's hand moving towards her knife, and kicked it out of the way. Then she put a foot on Ruby's throat, causing her to gasp and choke for breath.

"Your partner's quite the scrapper," Aquamarine admitted, "but I'm the professional here. Best to give me what you want."

"You will leave here without knowing anything," Sapphire insisted quietly. Though she couldn't help looking across the room at Ruby, watching her squirm beneath Aquamarine, a pleading, helpless look in her eyes that broke Sapphire's heart.

"You sure?" Aquamarine said, putting away her rod and reaching into her coat again.
"You might be an expert in the Future," she said. "But I know something of the Past."

And she drew a long, thin dagger with a black wooden handle and started examining it in her hands.

"This, for instance, is what's referred to in the trade as MVSN dagger. Mussolini's Black Shirts carried these, mostly for ceremonial purposes, though it wouldn't surprise me if they found their way into a combat zone."

Sapphire pretended to be interested in Aquamarine's lecture, while puzzling out ways to help Ruby.

"I obtained this weapon from my mother back in 1950," Aquamarine continued. "She used it on at least one mission during the War, sinking it into the heart of a Vichy General in Nimes just before Operation Dragoon in '44. When she gifted it to me, she told me that she'd spent the past decade as a Hunter of Fascists and she wanted me to continue the tradition. What better way than to smite them with their own weapon?"

She smiled evilly, stepping off Ruby's throat. Ruby coughed and gasped for breath.

"Ever since then, I've often thought, what else could this dagger have been used for? Maybe Mussolini and his pals used it to stab Matteoti to death back in the '20s? To slit the throats of Ethiopians or impale Republicans in Spain? Perhaps to flay a Greek partisan alive or murder an Allied tank driver? Or, just possibly, to slow and methodically stab and slash and emasculate an SOE operative to death thousands of miles from home, and far beyond any help, knowing full well that he would never talk."

For a moment, Aquamarine's countenance changed. She seemed sad, vulnerable, upset. And Ruby seemed to sense it, sharing a resolute glance with Sapphire, who looked on but didn't dare react.

Then Aquamarine's slasher smile returned, and grabbed Ruby's hair and pulled her up with a yelp. Then put the dagger to her throat.

"Of course, what I do know is who it's killed in the meantime. How many people I've used it against over the years. I generally save it for a special occasion, but this seems as good as any..."

And just as she seemed poised to slash Ruby's throat, Sapphire gasped and put her hands to her mouth.

"Stop!" she said.

Aquamarine fixed her with a glare and released Ruby, dropping her head against the ground.

"That's better."

"I can't tell you where they are," Sapphire said, in a hurried, frantic voice so unlike her usual laconic monotone. "I'm not one hundred percent sure. But I know where they live in DC. It will...It will give you some place to start."

Aquamarine's expression was unreadable; she could be satisfied or disappointed, happy or angry.

Tears started flowing down Sapphire's face as she contemplated Ruby's fate.

"Please, don't hurt her," she said. "That's all I can tell you."

Aquamarine frowned, then stepped away from Ruby.

"You silly child," Aquamarine said, drawing closer, the candlelight casting a tall, angry shadow
against the opposite wall. "I already know where they live. We've had their phone tapped for two weeks! Do you really think you can appease me?"

"I've told you all I know," Sapphire insisted.

"Too bad for you, then," Aquamarine snarled. The hilt of her dagger glowed in the light as Aquamarine approached.

Sapphire closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

"Wait!"

Aquamarine looked over and saw Ruby slowly getting to her feet. When Aquamarine pointed the dagger at her, she raised a hand and shook her head.

"No-no more of that," Ruby sputtered. "Please. She's telling the truth."

Then Ruby sighed and offered something else.

"They're with that...woman," Ruby coughed out, still recovering from the shock. "Perry something. She works for Senator Dewey's office. She's been in touch with"

"Oh, I see," Aquamarine said quietly, contemplating the dagger in her hands. She already knew that much, but was interested to see what they'd tell her.

"I don't remember where he's from, but..."

"Senator Dewey. He's the newest one on the Committee, I think?" Aquamarine made a show of thinking about it, tapping the point of her dagger against her temple.

"He represents Delmarva," Sapphire offered. "Small state on the Chesapeake Bay."

"**Really?**" Aquamarine said, her voice dripping contempt and disbelief. "How interesting."

Another moment of deadly silence. Then she turned to Sapphire.

"You didn't tell me anything I didn't already knew, or couldn't have guessed," Aquamarine said with scorn. "Some psychic you are! At least I didn't pay for this consultation."

Sapphire was still too frightened to respond.

"That said, it didn't occur to me that this...strange, inquisitive little woman might be the key to all this. How stupid of me. So at least you spotted something that wound up in my blind spot. Thank you both very much."

She made an exaggerated curtsy, then lunged towards Ruby, who cowered in fear. As she moved to leave she pocketed her dagger again.

"You don't see the irony here, do you?" Sapphire said.

"What's that?" Aquamarine demanded.

"You've spent your life hunting fascists...and now you've become one."

If the thought bothered Aquamarine, she didn't show it. Instead, she smirked and stepped through the curtain, stepping over Bismuth's unconscious body and humming again as she exited the store.
As soon as she was out of sight, Ruby raised herself off the floor and bolted over to Sapphire, squeezing her in a tight, protective hug.

"Sapphy, Sapphy! Are you okay?" she asked.

"Am I okay?" Sapphire said, tears flowing down and spilling onto her dress. "You're the one getting electrocuted!"

"All in a day's work," Ruby said, trying to keep things light. Though she, too, started sobbing.

Sapphire comforted Ruby, patting her on the back.

"There, there. We are okay. Both you and I. And Bismuth, despite her injuries, will be fine. This will all pass."

"I'll make mincemeat out of that poncy limey bitch," Ruby growled, regaining her anger.

"Some day, perhaps," Sapphire said. "It's a possible future. But we'll worry about that some other time."

She kissed Ruby on the head and looked in her eyes. Ruby dried Sapphire's tears and brushed back her hair.

"I don't get to see your eyes often enough," she muttered. Sapphire just smiled.

"Right now," she said, "there's something more urgent we must do."

She started blowing out the candles as Ruby rose to her feet, standing guard as if nothing had happened.

"We must find a way to warn our friends."
Mr. Universe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 3, 1975

Beach City, DV

Greg spent most of the week wondering why he was still hanging around Beach City.

It wasn't for Ronaldo's sake. The wannabe filmmaker acted as loopy and mercurial as ever; instead of discussing the film project he'd lured Greg out here for, he invariably ranted about the latest round of nonsense he'd consumed from pamphlets found at the boardwalk. Most recently he'd started raving about the Trilateral Commission; Greg didn't know or care what that was, and told Ronaldo to fuck off until he actually wanted to talk business.

It wasn't necessarily for his friends either, though he liked hanging out with Jamie and a few other townspeople who weren't Ronaldo. And he did like Beach City, which was by the ocean, quiet and uncrowded. Which allowed for a lot of time to reflect and play and try writing music. Though that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

Certainly he wasn't a good enough fighter to help the Crystal Gems, in any meaningful way. He was well-built and tough, he had served the briefest of stints in the Army, doing a painless two year hitch at Fort Dix without ever going overseas. Which was fine with him, even though his clerical job was rather dull. He hated the idea of killing someone, and he never really mastered firing a rifle or the generally concept of military discipline anyway.

He also didn't have much fighting experience outside of the occasional bar brawl or smacking Marty around for being a jackass...and that kind of fighting wouldn't come in handy against government operatives with guns and other weapons. Especially since Rose's death, he considered himself a pacifist who wouldn't harm a fly, even in self-defense. He imagined himself as useless in a fight, should things come to that. And the way Garnet and Amethyst practiced with their weapons on the beach daily, a confrontation seemed inevitable.

And then there was Pearl. That she was still cloistered in her room recuperating from her emergency surgery didn't make Greg feel any better.

He got along well with Amethyst, and didn't mind hanging out with her separately from Rose, even though she occasionally amplified and encouraged his worst instincts. They grew extremely close after Rose's death, and more than once there seemed a chance they might become more than friends...but somehow they drifted apart, since Greg's career and Amethyst's new vocation didn't allow for a serious commitment.

Garnet...he didn't know what to make of the woman at first. He had few friends of color before meeting her and their early meetings were always awkward, especially when Garnet started spouting political jargon. But they warmed to each other; Garnet took the idea that a friend of Rose's was a friend of hers, and the two found a way to hit it off. Garnet even joined him in a concert once, playing keyboard to back up his guitar. She was also a decent singer, though she didn't often show this talent to her friends.

But Pearl...things had always been a nightmare with her. And frankly, Greg couldn't blame her.
Despite the brisk October air, Greg found himself sweating through his shirt and his jacket. It wasn’t just the usual adrenaline of a concert and the glowing lights and the energy of performing. It was nervousness. And worthlessness. The sickening feeling that he’d already become a has-been.

His name was still enough to attract a decent-sized crowd - maybe 2,000 or 3,000, not bad for an outdoor concert in the fall. But he could tell that they weren’t really into it, listening politely or dozing off at best. A few boos started rippling through the audience as the show wore on.

It wasn’t Greg’s singing or performing, he felt, that wasn’t good; they seemed as good as always. Nor his back-up band, who were properly tuned and in-key and rockin’ their hearts out. No, he was inclined to blame the material he was performing. His latest album had been written almost exclusively by a combination of Marty and a professional lyricist who wrote words for mediocre Broadway shows. "You need to be more commercial," Marty had told him, "so you might as well get some help! This guy’ll make you a hit!"

Shows what Marty knew.

As Greg wrapped up another song about love and heartbreak to polite, unenthusiastic applause, a smattering of boos and "You sucks!", he winced and sighed internally. He knew there might be one way to salvage the evening, loath though he might be to do it.

"Thanks for comin’ out tonight," Greg said into the mike as someone hurled a beer can onstage. "Hey, hey, keep it cool, guys! I’m not Spiro Agnew, after all!" His stab at topical humor led to more boos.

"Now I came here tonight to promote my new album, but that doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten your old favorite. Everyone, let’s give it up for our old friend, The Water Witch."

He started strumming his guitar to begin his biggest hit - really, his only hit - for about the six millionth time in his life. A few whoops went up from the crowd as he began:

"The beach was hot, the day was long
"An ice cold brew, a catchy song
"Everything going well
"Til like a bat outta hell
"Came the Water Witch!"

The crowd went from unenthusiastic to spellbound as he lit into the big guitar solo. Greg felt his reticence slipping away as the song went on. There were worse things than being a one-hit wonder, even if that hit was overplayed and cheesy as hell and not really what Greg wanted for his music.

As Greg looked into the audience, hearing cheers, he spotted Rose for the first time. A large woman in a white-and-pink sundress and thick, gorgeous red hair, beaming at him from the second row. Next to her a tall, thin, conservatively-dressed woman who seemed awkward and out of place.

The first woman watched Greg with a smile directed straight at him. A look of pure joy. And Greg felt his heart sink and he couldn’t help returning her smile.

That was Rose.
Rose, from the very first, was extremely indiscreet about her feelings for him. He chatted briefly with two younger groupies until he stumbled across Rose at the exit, with her friend standing nearby.

"Mr. Universe, that was...Wow!"

Greg laughed. "That good, huh? Nah, it sucked. My music's taking a turn for the worse."

"I couldn't disagree more," Rose insisted. "Although...well, I felt like the last song you did was the most real."

"You got that right," Greg muttered. He sighed. "Guess there's always gonna be one song that works and a lot that don't."

"Pearl and I had a wonderful time," Rose beamed. "Right, Pearl?"

"It was certainly a unique show," Pearl agreed stiffly, forcing a smile.

Greg figured that Rose was here for a reason, not just to give him a pep talk. And so he extended the offer:

"Hey Rose, you, uh, wanna get something to drink?" Then he added: "Your friend can come, too."

Rose clasped her hands together and smiled. "I'd love to." But Pearl's smile vanished, replaced with an angry scowl.

From there it was bliss, for the most part. Rose wouldn't stop hugging and kissing him after the shows, even holding his hand in public and making a show of affection. Just walking around with her gave him a thrill he'd never felt before. The sensation that she wasn't just a fan or a groupie or even a lover, but a truly special and unique human being.

Then he'd see Pearl, who always seemed to accompany Rose, scowling in disbelief, and anger, and his heart would sink with confusion and guilt. Wondering if something that seemed so wonderful really could be, if it hurt someone else.

It didn't take him long to realize that Rose and Pearl were more than friends. Not that he cared overmuch. He hadn't been raised to be tolerant; rather, his Italian-American family considered homosexuality something never to discuss. (He could imagine his cousin Andy, a proud Silent Majoritarian, ranting and raving about the topic, but he didn't talk to Andy any more than necessary.)

Over time though, he got the impression that Pearl took their relationship a lot more seriously than Rose did. Pearl seemed to regard Rose as her everything, while Pearl was just one person of several, perhaps many, for Rose to have fun with. He felt a stab of sympathy for Pearl, even if it was clear that she hated his guts.

But maybe that was just his interpretation. Certainly Rose seemed to think she could have both him and Pearl and the same time, and acted that way in front of him.

It irritated Greg, and they would occasionally argue about it and try to clarify where they stood with each other.

"Greg, I have feelings for both of you," Rose insisted. "You can't make me choose."

"But...I mean, is it really fair to either of us?" Greg pleaded helplessly. "Me and Pearl? How are we
gonna make this work?"

"The heart wants what it wants," Rose said mysteriously. Her words would have infuriated Greg, except for Rose's eyes and smile and utter warmth, which compelled him to accept them.

But Greg knew better than to solicit promises of fidelity, because he knew they'd be worthless.

And Pearl, at first, seemed to tolerate it, albeit with chagrin. More than once she'd call Greg a "phase," something that couldn't possibly last. Which implied to Greg that Rose had a history of this sort of thing, though he didn't press her on it. She would never miss an opportunity to show Greg up at a dinner or event with friends. After dancing with Rose backstage at a concert, Pearl crashed the show with an exhibition of her sword fighting skills. It was a strange, unnerving experience; Greg thought it was less Pearl's staking claim to Rose than putting Greg on notice that she could kill him if she really wanted.

And Greg didn't have an answer to that. And while Pearl was rarely so overtly violent and hostile afterwards, neither did she warm up to him. Instead she grudgingly tolerated him and seethed from the sidelines as he and Rose grew more serious, until they moved in together at Beach City and Pearl was left, back in DC, a sometime girlfriend to visit and indulge while she spend time with her real boyfriend.

"Does this mean that we're monogamous now?" Greg asked nervously.

"We'll see," Rose said with a smile. Not very reassuring.

But she seemed to try her best, and afterwards Greg never saw her openly flirting with anyone else, man or woman. He only saw Pearl once or twice, and she politely kept her distance without overtly showing the naked, angry jealousy from before. She seemed to be accepting defeat, or else biding her time in a plan to win back Rose.

Over time, to Greg's astonishment, even started settling into a homemaker's role. She stayed at home most of the time, cooking and cleaning and turning from a Bohemian to a dutiful helpmate. Greg, whose music career continued sputtering, didn't know what to make of it, and Rose's comments on the matter didn't seem very helpful.

"Are you really going to quit business and just, like, look after me? Not sure how long you can rely on me to support us."

"Greg, I love you," Rose assured him. "I'll do anything to make this work. We should both be happy; that's what counts more than anything."

"But what about your sewing business? I don't want you to give up on your dreams just for the sake of me."

Rose smiled mysteriously. "My dream is to be here with you," she insisted.

She seemed as good as her word. No more trips to New York or DC or Philadelphia with her art friends. If Rose occasionally seemed restless in her job, wistful for something that she didn't want, it was momentary melancholy that passed. She and Greg discussed a new dream that they had together - opening up a restaurant. Greg had the idea of selling burgers and hot dogs, "nothing fancy, but we could do some decent business on the boardwalk."

"I'm all for the idea," Rose agreed, "once I learn how to cook."

"Cooking burgers is easy!"
"For most people," Rose reminded him. "But remember, I'm the one who manages to burn cold cereal."

"That's because you're not supposed to turn on the stove when you make Lucky Charms..."

"Well, I know that now..."

When the Crystal Gems wanted to see her, they'd come up to Beach City and he and Rose would entertain them. Occasionally they had more serious conversations, the contents of which Greg only guessed at at the time (the true nature of the Gems, somehow, didn't occur to him until much later), but mostly it was casual, cozy friendliness that Greg could deal with.

Only Pearl's presence and occasional resentful glares indicated there was anything wrong. And after awhile, Greg did his best to ignore her.

Through it all, Rose seemed happy. And that's what made Greg crazy, in retrospect.

There was no reason for what happened next.

"So, you're a musician?"

Greg was a little startled when the shy, slender young woman in a sundress - Lapis? - sat down next to him on the beach. They hadn't spoken much - at all, really - and she didn't seem the type to approach a stranger. But Greg didn't necessarily mind the company, as out of place as he felt here.

"Kinda," Greg said, playing some notes on his guitar. "It's been awhile since my last album...My career's going nowhere fast."

"Hmm. Have you done anything I might have heard of?"

"Maybe. Do you know The Water Witch?"

"Water Witch?" Lapis racked her memory. "Yeah, that...sort of rings a bell."

"I would hope it did," Greg muttered. "They played it on the radio, like, every 15 minutes back in the fall of '69."

"Sorry I'm drawing a blank," Lapis apologized. "So many songs to keep track of...You know, I used to listen to buy every rock album ever when it came out."

"Uh-huh," Greg said. "No kidding?"

"Well, that's hyperbole. But yeah, I used to have a pretty awesome collection of stuff. Was really into some of the early British bands."

"The Beatles?"

"I'm thinking more like Manfred Mann and The Kinks?"

"Ahh, now those were good groups," Greg said. "I mean, the Beatles were great, but...Anyone can like the Beatles."

"Yeah," Lapis muttered.

"She's always brewing trouble and tea," Greg sang, riffing a few notes on his guitar. They launched
into the Manfred Mann song for a moment, with Lapis snapping her fingers and humming along. The two laughed as they finished.

"Say, you're pretty good," Lapis said. "Are you writing anything new?"

"I keep trying to," Greg said, fidgeting with the guitar tuners. "But...I dunno. I keep wanting to write songs about Rose, which just...at this point, it doesn't seem healthy."

"Rose?" Lapis asked.

"The girls haven't told you about Rose?" Greg asked, incredulously. "She was, like, their leader. The one who got them all together. Kinda crazy stuff, when you think about it. Says something about the kind of woman that she was that she got Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl together."

"Yeah, I guess," Lapis said. "I haven't interacted that much with them, except Amethyst. She seems cool."

"Amethyst is a real trip," Greg snickered. "Take it from me. But yeah, Rose was kinda the leader of this outfit, and...well, it's a long story."

Lapis stared at Greg for a moment, inviting him to explain.

"I guess the short version is...I loved Rose. And so did Pearl."

"Ohh." Lapis nodded in understanding.

"It was...not a pretty situation. And then she died, and it got worse. And me and Pearl...well, we're still not really on speaking terms."

"Bad break-up?"

"I don't think there was really ever a break up," Greg admitted. "Just...you know, Rose did what she wanted. She didn't see a problem with seeing both of us at the same time. But she never really thought...I guess it didn't occur to her that me or Pearl might have a problem with it."

"That's messed up," Lapis empathized.

"Yeah, but I can't be too mad about it," Greg muttered. "Not anymore, at least."

Greg sighed and lowered his head, unable to say more. Lapis decided not to press him any further.

"So, who are the Crystal Gems, any way?" Lapis asked. "And, like, what do you guys do? You just drive around and look for damsels in distress to rest?"

"Well, I'm not really one of them..." Greg protested. "I'm more...gem adjacent."

"Okay. But still, I mean, they were pretty badass, I'll admit that...But they didn't stop to think whether or not I wanted to be rescued. I guess that's what bothers me. Why did they do it? What do they want from me? Am I a prisoner, a hostage? It's just...I wish I knew."

Lapis looked out at the ocean, her hair wisping in the breeze, eyes full of worry. Greg tried to come up with an answer, something to reassure her. But realized he couldn't.

"So, you said you're into music?" Greg said, hoping to lighten the mood.

"Oh, yeah!" Lapis said, apparently happy at the change of subject.
"You play an instrument?"

"Not really," Lapis admitted. "I'm one of those people who loves music but can't play a lick on anything."

"That's most people," Greg said.

"I used to paint, but...it's been so long since I've done anything."

"Were you good at it?"

Lapis smiled wistfully. "Used to be. Nothing too special, just landscapes and still lifes and stuff. Nothing you'd hang in a museum, but...I liked doing it."

"What made you stop?" Greg asked. Lapis sighed and didn't answer, lowering her head between her legs.

"Well...far be it for me to give you advice, since I don't really know your story," Greg said carefully. "But if I were me, and I had a talent...I'd use it."

"Even if it reminded you of horrible things?" Lapis asked, her eyes obscured by her hair.

Greg thought about her words, then what he'd said a moment ago about Rose. And the two clicked.

"Especially then," he said.

Lapis smiled again and got up to leave. "Well, sorry to bother you," she said, extending a hand. "It's Greg, right?"

"Yeah?" he said, shaking her hand.

"Lapis, Lapis Lazuli. Like the stone."

"Neat," Greg said. "Greg...well, Universe is my stage name. My last name is DeMayo, but...nobody calls me that any more."

"Anyway...thanks for talking," Lapis said. "And if you come up with any new tunes, you're welcome to try them out on me."

Greg smiled. "I would love to," he said.

As Lapis walked away, slowly making her way back to the beach house, Greg thought about their conversation, thought about Rose. Thought about the best way to get some of the pain and misery out of his system.

Within minutes, he had the first few bars of a brand new song.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not entirely happy with the Greg-centric chapters of this story so far, since it's just fitting his SU backstory into the setting more than coming up with an original personality. Oh well, for now; that can be fixed later, if need be.
October 3, 1975

Less than a week and Pearl was already sick to death of being bedridden.

She could hear Amethyst pilfering the house’s record collection and blasting loud music through the house (something she did often enough back in DC). Hear Garnet going out to test-fire her shotgun every once in awhile, a persistent reminder of the danger they all faced. And Greg kept noodling away on his guitar outside, his notes occasionally approximating a song.

And here she was, still in bed, still weak, still recovering. Still feeling frustrated and impotent. Nothing to do but take in the tastefully decorated room and the smell of salt air and the feel of a light blue bed sheet to keep her company. And both of those had already exhausted their interest.

She sighed and glanced at her sword in its scabbard across the room, taunting her with all it represented. Freedom and strength, tantalizingly close, frustratingly far away.

At least Peridot was here sometimes, peppering her with questions about her career and secrets, and occasional, awkward attempts at small talk and commiseration. Pearl noticed that she seemed a lot happier, a lot more content and self-assured than she usually was. And seeing the way that she and Lapis held hands and giggled at each other, it didn't take much guesswork to figure out what had changed.

And Garnet, too, who tended to Pearl, making sure he had food and water and medicine and fluffed her pillows and made sure she wasn't moving around too much. She wondered why Garnet, who took so much pride in her independence, would do this for her. She guessed it took a different kind of strength to look after a friend.

And Pearl retreated, as she often did, into her inner thoughts and private regrets. Especially here. Where it happened to Rose.

*If I'd been here,* she often wondered, *could I have saved her?*

A question she could never answer; that at this point, she shouldn't even bother asking herself. What's done was done, and thinking about it would only reopen old wounds.

But it was always there, hanging over everything she did. One more regret among a million.

_She remembered how much she’d resented Greg. From the moment they met, she knew Rose was smitten with him, but didn’t know how to stop her from following her instincts. So part of her resigned herself to the arrangement, grateful for any time she and Rose had together._

*It's not that she disliked Greg, as a person. He seemed nice and surprisingly down-to-earth for a celebrity, even if his music wasn't that great, in Pearl's opinion. He was always impeccably polite to Pearl, despite the awkwardness of their relationship. And she treated him with icy disdain in response._

_Though she couldn't help it. Her relationship with Rose involved a great deal of risk (though she*
didn't flatter herself as being brave or courageous), at least while she worked for the FBI. She took more than a little pride in being able to keep it secret yet stable, forbidden yet fulfilling. And then he came along to ruin it.

Yet another part of her thought that she was just being selfish. As usual.

That was Pearl's problem. She always doubted herself. Always questioned her own motives. Always wondered whether she was really doing or thinking the right thing for the right reasons. And if she wasn't, what did that say about her?

With that attitude, what was the point of doing anything?

So she decided to bite her tongue while Greg and Rose's relationship grew more serious. Though she had bigger things on her mind.

By that time, the fall of 1972, her professional life was effectively over. Worse, she was also a criminal. Possibly a traitor.

Because the previous year, she'd met one of Rose's friends (Rose, somehow, seemed to know everyone) at a party, an ACLU leader, telling Pearl offhandedly that they were looking for proof of a major FBI surveillance program.

"They think we're all paranoid kooks," the man, a middle-aged Philadelphian, told Pearl. "But we know something's up. We just need a way to prove it."

Pearl nodded and listened sympathetically. "I wish I could help," she offered. "It's hard working for the Bureau these days..."

The young man set his face in a deep scowl. "Yeah, I'll bet," he said, putting his drink down.

Pearl looked down at her own drink. At that moment, she made a decision that would change her life forever.

"What if I were to tell you that I knew where you could find these documents?"

She said it almost flippantly, like a teasing joke. The man arched an eyebrow in disbelief and incredulity.

"If you give me a reason to believe you," he said, crossing his arms, "I'll be happy to listen."

Pearl smiled devilishly, feeling the thrill of rebellion course through her.

"Let's just say for now that it's in your own backyard," she said, her voice mischievous and, for Pearl, uncommonly seductive. "If you're really interested, ask Rose to get you in touch with me."

A few weeks later, the gentleman, one William Davidson, led a small team of burglars into an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania. The nation focused on a fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier; Davidson's group, The Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI, uncovered something of more lasting significance: thousands upon thousands of COINTELPRO files, exposing the Bureau's campaign against subversives, political opponents and everyone who ever said or wrote a cross word about J. Edgar Hoover.

All there, exposing decades of lies and deceit. Exactly where Pearl said they would be.
At first, Pearl had been thrilled by the experience. Rose branded her “my terrifying, renegade Pearl!” and she adopted that, relishing her own uncommon rebellion. Amazed by the headlines caused by her action, and amused that the Bureau seemed unable to catch the perpetrators.

Only after the true impact sunk in did she realize what was going on.

It happened one day that April when she was summoned into an office by Miss Gandy. Present were several FBI officials, including Bill Sullivan, her nominal supervisor, and the Director himself, with the ever-present Clyde Tolson standing by him, struggling to maintain even footing despite his recent strokes.

"It's been over a month since this break-in, and we know nothing!" Hoover barked, trembling with rage. "These dirty rats are running roughshod over the rule of law, thumbing their noses at us, at common decency, at freedom! And we have nothing on them. No idea who did this! Or how they even knew where to look! This is unacceptable."

"Maybe someone within the Bureau gave them the information," Sullivan suggested bluntly. The room grew deathly quiet; Pearl sank back into her seat, expecting another explosion.

"Who, Mr. Sullivan?" Hoover demanded. "How on Earth could anyone infiltrate the Bureau to such a high level degree that they would be privy to this information?"

He stared at the assembled bureaucrats with a deadly bulldog glare, challenging them to provide an answer. No one dared.

"Mr. Felt, this seems like your department," Hoover barked to an Assistant Director with slicked-back silver hair. "Any chance it's those Weather Underground creeps? Some radical degenerates like that?"

"That would be my guess," the AD offered helplessly, folding his hands. "Of course, the office was virtually unguarded and had a tiny staff. Breaking in would have been the easy part. Finding the information..."

"Exactly!" Hoover said, thumping his hand on the table. "Either it's a mole, which I sincerely hope it isn't...because that would mean someone in the Bureau, possibly someone in this room" (Pearl blushed, hoping that no one noticed) "betrayed us to the Communists...is a traitor to their country. That, or someone was simply careless. Which might be even worse!"

Tolson put a shaky hand on his boss's shoulder, hoping to calm him. But Hoover remained too angry to be placated.

"Mr. Felt, you're going to devote full energy to tracking these people down," he said. "Mr. Sullivan, Miss Gandy, this is an order. All of your personnel will speak with Mr. Felt and his assistants until we clear this matter up. Once you find out who did this, report it to me immediately so we can handle it appropriately. These rats will be exterminated, and they will be exterminated by us."

Hearing those words, a phrase Hoover had once uttered about John Dillinger and friends, now directed at her, Pearl felt sick to her stomach. She knew she couldn't remain with the Bureau any longer. Now she could only think about was survival.

After she left the FBI in June, having somehow avoided Mark Felt's intense questioning and an investigation into her private life (which, unbeknownst to Pearl, uncovered "an unusually close relationship with a woman named Rose Quartz, native of New York City, which may be of an
unnatural and degenerate nation"), Pearl had nothing. No job, of course; and she didn't dare get a public job so soon after leaving the Bureau. No apartment, as the money dried up. She tried to contact her father, who was ill and couldn't be reached. Her brother would be a hopeless case.

All she had was Rose.

So she and Rose moved full-time to New York. Pearl took a number of small-time jobs, then worked as an assistant in Rose's dress shop. She learned to enjoy sewing and designing outfits, though her nitpicking demands for precision drove Rose crazy.

Not much money, just enough to get by. Just enough for the occasional movie night or concert or trip to the beach.

All she had was Rose. And for a year, that was enough.

Until she met him. And that changed everything.

"Could you just please put me through to the Senator?" Peridot screamed into a telephone. "This is important."

"You haven't been in the office for over a week, Perry," Stan Bayard insisted. "The Senator thought you'd been abducted or kidnapped or something. Now to just call us out of the blue...My God, you're lucky you haven't been fired."

"I'm lucky I'm alive!" Peridot shouted. She tried modulating her tone, but it didn't help much. "Listen Stan, I have a big witness who's going to testify to years of FBI misconduct based on first-hand experience! That's where I've been...tracking down and coaching a witness. She said she'll testify in public or by deposition, however it can be arranged."

"FBI hearings won't be for a few months," Stan said blandly.

"Stan, did you not just hear what I said?" Peridot yelled.

"Yeah, I heard you," Stan said. "And at this point, I'm not sure I should be..."

Peridot had barely been keeping it together as it was. Now she exploded.

"Now listen here, you stupid snot-nosed blue blooded bastard!" she said, unleashing months of pent-up hostility into one savage, cutting tirade. "I've put up with your condescension and chauvinism and treating me like a pile of dog shit since January and I'm not gonna take it any more. I have information that will prove the very thing we're ostensibly investigating. And not only will you not let me tell the Senator, you won't even listen!"

She didn't notice as Lapis crept up behind her.

"Now listen here, you stupid snot-nosed blue blooded bastard!" she said, unleashing months of pent-up hostility into one savage, cutting tirade. "I've put up with your condescension and chauvinism and treating me like a pile of dog shit since January and I'm not gonna take it any more. I have information that will prove the very thing we're ostensibly investigating. And not only will you not let me tell the Senator, you won't even listen!"

She slammed the phone down so hard the receiver shook. And stood there panting for a long moment, until she noticed she wasn't alone.
"Lapis..."

"Wow, I didn't realize that I was so important to you," Lapis muttered dryly.

"Um...if you can believe it, I was actually talking about Pearl," Peridot said, embarrassed. She feared that Lapis would be horrified and run out of the room at the thought of being used again. And that everything she'd worked to build over the past few days would crumble back to nothing.

"I mean, the danger part, sure...that's just kind of how it is with me," Lapis said, leaning against the wall. "But...man, you really tore that guy a new asshole."

"He deserved it," Peridot said through gritted teeth. "And it's been a long time coming."

"I could tell," Lapis said.

The air still hung thick with awkwardness. Then Lapis forced herself to chuckle.

"What, may I ask, is so funny?" Peridot demanded.

"Something tells me you're out of a job," Lapis teased. "Man, I've seen you worked up before but never..."

"Ugh, you're right," Peridot said, burying her head in her hands.

"Would it help if I said it sounds like a shitty job?" Lapis asked, walking over and putting a hand gently on her shoulder. Peridot muttered something indistinguishable.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Lapis said, kissing her gently on the forehead. Peridot noticed and perked up immediately, trading shy smiles with the young informant.

"Well...Pearl told me she was interested in testifying about what she knows," Peridot said. "But it would appear that I've screwed that up. Classic Perry!"

"Maybe," Lapis said.

"Lapis..." Peridot thought of what she wanted to say. But her mind drew a blank again.

"Remember what I said to you on the beach the other night," she muttered. "It's...it's still true."

"I know," Lapis whispered before teasing Peridot's hair. That seemed to loosen Peridot up, just a bit.

"It's hard for me to trust people," Lapis said. "I mean, you know my history...or you know enough of it that..." And she trailed off.

Peridot growled. Again with the dread hints and evasiveness. It was getting irritating.

"But I trust that you won't use me," Lapis assured her, clasping Peridot's hands. "I'm gonna take a walk on the beach. Supposed to rain this afternoon then clear up for night. I think Greg talked about grilling some food outside for dinner."

"I could eat."

"Well, it's not ready yet. Wanna join me?"

Peridot considered this, then shook her head sadly.
"Nah, I'll catch you later," she said. "I still have a few things to put together about Pearl...just in case."

"Okay," Lapis said, breaking contact and backing out of the room. "But, you know where to find me if...you need anything."

"I know," Peridot said, sounding disappointed in herself. Then she sighed and hunched over the table, taking notes.

Lapis watched her for a minute, then left the room, her face deflated into a sullen pout. Disappointed in Peridot, sure, but disappointed in herself, too.

_There will be a time_, she insisted to herself. _A time to tell her everything, whatever she decides to do with it._

_But when? And how?_

Lapis couldn't answer. Instead, she retreated to her room, closed the door and grabbed another novel off the shelf. So much for that walk.

"I still need to be careful about my food intake, Amethyst. An appendectomy is not a minor surgery!"

"Pearl, I already talked to Greg. He said he'll stop by and grill some chicken. You're safe to eat that. Just avoid the red meats and junk."

"I guess I could do that..."

"It's Greg, isn't it? That's why you're being weird about this."

Amethyst said this like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Pearl blushed and sunk down into her bed.

"Pearl...Greg's as messed up about what happened with Rose as you are," Amethyst sighed. "It wasn't his fault, any more than it was yours. He was just the one...the one that found her."

And a tear welled up in the corner of Amethyst's eye. But she managed to keep from crying.

"I know," Pearl said, though she wasn't sure how much she accepted it.

"It's awful that she had to go out in...that way," Amethyst muttered. "She was such an amazing woman."

"She _was_," Pearl confirmed, smiling blissfully as she remembered.

"Anyway." Amethyst managed to fight back any further tears and screw on her conversation face. "Greg is my friend and Garnet's too. So this little hideout won't be the last time we're seeing him. You're gonna have to make your peace with him sooner or later."

"Easier said than done," Pearl muttered, starting to pull the sheet over her head. She really did not want to have this conversation.

"At least come to dinner," Amethyst said, practically begging her friend. "I hate seeing you like this."

The note of unforced sincerity caught Pearl's attention. She lowered the sheet and looked Amethyst
"Besides, the fresh air will do you some good," Amethyst said, lapsing back into her normal conversational rhythms. "And hey, Greg's premiering a brand new song."

"A new song by Greg is not incentive," Pearl groaned. Even if she didn't have personal issues with the man, she didn't much care for his music.

"Fair enough, P," Amethyst said. "But even if you're not there for him...do it for us. Have a little fun."

Pearl looked out the window, spying Greg walking in the sand below, chatting with Garnet.

"Well, I suppose I could at least stop by," she offered, watching Greg and Garnet converse and laugh with each other. "I could certainly stand to get out of this bed."

"Attagirl," Amethyst said, slapping Pearl on the back. "Anyway, it'll probably be awhile, but...let me or Garnet know, okay."

"Sure thing," Pearl said, smiling again as Amethyst left the room. Left her alone with her thoughts.

Somewhere in Washington, a phone tap picked up the conversation between Peridot and Stan Bayard.

The phone tap led to an office where a transcriptionist took furious notes.

The transcriptionist took the tape and his notes to a superior...

Who routed them to them to the appropriate department...

"Well, this certainly is something," Aquamarine said, listening to the tape. And she beamed malevolently, realizing its significance.

_You can't hide for long_, she told herself. _It's only a matter of time until we find you._

Chapter End Notes

The Media burglary receives much more detailed treatment in Betsy Metsger's _The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI_ (2014). It most amazes me that the burglars were able to keep their identity secret for over forty years! And only then because they voluntarily came forward to the author of this book.
By the time sun set, fall finally descended on Beach City. Suddenly, it grew much colder than it had been during their exile yet. A brisk wind blew across the beach, forcing Greg and the Gems to bundle up in long sleeve shirts and coats as they prepared for their outdoor dinner.

"It's not exactly barbecue weather," Greg apologized, adding wood to the bonfire. "But I guess that's what you get for going on the lam in October instead of July..."

"Like we planned this," Peridot murmured.

"We won't hold the weather against you, Greg," Amethyst said, punching him on the shoulder. "At least as long as the burgers are still warm."

"Well, they ought to be," Greg muttered, walking over to the grill. "You like 'em charred black, right?"

"If they can't break my teeth, they aren't worth eating!" Amethyst insisted.

"Honestly, there is no way that a burger that well done can possibly be edible," Peridot scoffed. "You have reduced perfectly good prime beef to globs of ground-up, bloody sinew in the first place, and then you char it until it's barely recognizable as organic matter."

"As long as you smother everything in ketchup, it's all good!" Amethyst joked, licking her lips as Greg pressed the beef against the grill.

Peridot just wrinkled her nose and groaned as the smell of burning meat hit her. Lapis, sitting beside her, just giggled at Peridot's reaction.

"Oh Perry, lighten up!" Amethyst said. "We can't all eat filet mignon in the Capitol cafeteria."

"I'll have you know that the Capitol cafeteria only serves sandwiches on most days..."

"Wow, this is such an incredible inside story, you guys!" Amethyst joked, enjoying the discomfort on Peridot's face. "Washington as it really is! Where people only eat sandwiches like us normal folks..."

Thus provoked, Peridot shifted back into her arrogant mode. As she made her usual pompous gestures, Lapis nodded her head back and forth in unison; Amethyst tried hard not to laugh.

"I mean, when the Senator wants to treat us to something good, we always go to one of the many prestigious restaurants in the area."

"Well," Amethyst interrupted, "those prestigious restaurants of yours can't beat a homemade, grill-cooked black hamburger completely smothered in Heinz Tomato Ketchup!"
Peridot crossed her arms and sat in the sand, not interested in arguing about foods anymore. Lapis stifled another giggle and dropped down beside her, putting an arm on Peridot's shoulder.

"Anyway, how's the chicken coming along, Greg?" Amethyst asked, crowding around the grill.

"The meat's searing nicely," Greg replied, pointing with his spatula to a slightly blackened piece of poultry. "And, I can smell the spices from your marinade from here and damned if they aren't making me hungry."

"It's my mom's recipe," Amethyst said proudly. "Just the right mixture of peppers and spices. Spicy but not super-hot, enough for a little kick to the chicken."

"Smells good to me," Garnet said, leaning over the grill.

"Did you remember to save Pearl a piece without the spices?" Amethyst asked.

Greg looked surprised. "You, um, really think Pearl's coming? She's still not in great shape, and..." He trailed off, pretending to be focused on the meats.

"Pearl can eat chicken," Amethyst assured him. Though she cast a worried glance at the beach house, unsure whether her friend would show up.

"It's not the chicken I'm worried about," Greg muttered, wiping sweat off his forehead. "Pearl's still...Pearl."

"You got that right!" Amethyst laughed. Though after a moment she seemed profoundly sad by the thought.

"She'll cheer up when she hears your new song," Lapis offered hopefully. Though Greg's face suggested the opposite.

Garnet looked back and forth between Greg, pretending to be absorbed in the meat even though. And Amethyst, no longer able to keep up the pretense of being a goofball. And Peridot and Lapis, sitting quietly on the sidelines, not sure what to do or say.

"Excuse me for a minute," she said, nodding at Greg and stalking up the beach house.

"Looks like Garnet's gonna lay down the law," Amethyst said expectantly. "Man, I'd love to be a fly on that wall!"

Peridot and Lapis just exchanged sad, concerned glances. And Greg just grunted and continued flipping the meat, not interested in having this confrontation right now.

Always better on another day.

Garnet wasn't going to let this bullshit with Greg and Pearl ruin another evening.

She didn't expect them to make peace in one night...way too much water under the bridge for that. But they should at least learn to be in the same place at the same time. They were too afraid and stubborn even to take the smallest baby steps towards tolerating each other.

Of course, now Pearl currently had a built-in excuse - one that was actually somewhat valid. But then, Pearl could always find some reason to avoid Greg and put off confronting him for another day. This would end tonight. Or at least start.
Still, Garnet knew she had to be careful. Yelling at Pearl would bring out the worst in her, increase her stubbornness and intractability, make her dig in her heels and hurt her feelings and bring all sorts of stress. But she didn't always get the hint when you tried being subtle, either. Garnet had to find the sweet spot between them, and that was never easy.

This was always the problem with being the team leader. Or something like it, anyway (Pearl insisted that they didn't have a leader, except Rose). She had to gauge everything just so: every single word she spoke, every move she made, every action she took with utmost precision, or else everyone and everything would explode.

And it drove Garnet nuts. Nuts that Pearl, as smart and organized and precise and tough as she was, was still an emotional wreck who couldn't move past Rose. Nuts that Amethyst was too insecure to take herself seriously. She didn't even know what to make of Peridot or Lapis, as briefly as she'd known them, though she noticed their growing affection for each other as much as anyone and was glad that they, at least, had one thing to count on.

So Garnet gritted her teeth as she entered the beach house. Looked up the stairs for a long moment, breathing heavily in trepidation. Trying to calm herself, think through what she was going to say and, more important, how she was going to say it.

Come on Garnet, it's just Pearl, she told herself. She's your friend. Your ally. Just talk to her. You can do this. Peace of cake.

But another part of her brain answered: It's Pearl. And it's never that easy.

After wrestling with these thoughts for a long moment, Garnet put herself together and walked upstairs.

Pearl sat up in bed, looking out the window and watching everyone around the fire, cooking and chatting and keeping each other company. She sighed and felt so lonely, so sad, so angry and disgusted with herself that she couldn't join them. Something that should be so easy...

Then she heard her own angry words to Greg echoing in her mind, again and again...

YOU DID THIS TO HER! YOU KILLED ROSE!

WHY DIDN'T YOU STOP HER!? HOW COULD YOU NOT KNOW SHE HAD A DRUG PROBLEM!?

IF I'D BEEN THERE, I'D HAVE SAVED HER!

TO THINK THAT ROSE LEFT ME FOR SOME...SOME PIECE OF TRASH LIKE YOU!

Just thinking about them made her sick. The loud, unexpected harshness of unfiltered emotions bursting from her. Greg's face, hurt and heartbroken, finding his own guilt reflected and amplified back to him by someone who had equal cause to be upset.

At the time, it all felt like the right thing to say. Those horrible, hateful words were how she felt. They were the truth.

No...they weren't the truth. They were Pearl finding some way to blame someone, something for what had happened, even though there didn't seem to be a reason or explanation beyond Rose having a flaw that she'd kept hidden from Pearl, and just about everyone else. Sure, she drank and
smoked the occasional joint, but heroin just...didn't seem her style. Pearl couldn't square it with the Rose she knew and loved.

Well, everyone keeps secrets. Even from their loved ones. Pearl knew that better than anyone else.

But it didn't make her feel better about what happened.

She really wished that she could make things right with Greg. She didn't like the idea of him hating her, even though she deserved it. But that was a divide that she was still terrified to cross, a risk she wasn't willing to take.

If only it were that easy to talk to someone...

Garnet's knocking interrupted her thoughts. Pearl turned, instantly flushed and flustered.

"Oh, Garnet! Sorry, I didn't..."

"How are you doing tonight?" Garnet asked.

"Better, thanks," Pearl answered. "Still a little sore, but...I suspect it will take some time for me to fully recover."

"Yeah," Garnet said simply.

The two stayed awkwardly silent for a moment, Pearl's eyes darting around the room, down at the floor, up at the ceiling, always feeling Garnet's gaze boring into her. Then Garnet finally asked:

"Are you joining us for dinner?"

"Oh..." Pearl seemed flustered again. "Umm, well, I think I could eat, but...Wouldn't it be better if I stayed up here?"

"Better for who?" Garnet asked.

"Oh, better for..." Then Pearl sunk her head down. "Better for everyone."

Pearl suddenly became animated, rambling an explanation that barely made sense.

"I mean, if I stay inside I won't catch a cold, which won't do my body any favors as I recover from the surgery...And of course, there will be more food for everyone...and my being sick and mopey won't drag everybody down...I mean, maybe I'll just stay here and heat up some soup or something."

Garnet raised a hand to silence Pearl. After thinking it through carefully, noticing how Pearl reacted to her suggestion, Garnet decided on the gentle approach, what she called the Soft Shame.

"Pearl, the only thing that would drag anyone down is you not being there," Garnet said.

Pearl let out a disbelieving snicker. She didn't expect Garnet to say that.

"It won't be as much fun without you," Garnet insisted. "Sure, we could probably enjoy Greg's overcooked burgers and shitty music and Amethyst's bad jokes and Peridot's...whatever without you. But we wouldn't be complete. It wouldn't be the same."

Garnet stepped forward and put a hand on Pearl's shoulder. Pearl shivered; Garnet couldn't tell if it was fear or gratitude or sadness, maybe a mixture of both.
"We're a team," Garnet said, "all of us together. Whenever we're missing someone, it's not going to be the same. Who's going to tell Amethyst to wipe the ketchup off her face? Who's going to wince at Greg plucking his guitar strings? Who's going to argue with Peridot about the best way to fold napkins? Who's gonna exchange a smirk with me whenever things get really oblivious?

"And maybe most of all," Garnet offered, smiling as broadly as she could: "Who's gonna eat that plain, unseasoned chicken Greg grilled for you? Sure as hell isn't me."

Pearl smiled gratefully, though she kept looking down at the blanket for a moment. Until a sardonic smile spread over her first.

"Folding napkins?" she asked. "Seriously, that's what you come up with? Am I really that big of a loser?"

"What else do you and Peridot have in common?" Garnet asked. And Pearl chuckled. She felt a rush of warmth and gratitude through her chest, then sighed again.

"I just wish...Things need to be different with Greg. But all those horrible things I said to him after Rose died..." She shook her head. "He'll never forgive me."

"He already has," Garnet assured her, even though she wasn't entirely sure of this herself. "And I think you've forgiven him, deep down. You just put a wall up between you, and you need to try tearing it down. Make an effort. You can't go through life hating someone, except maybe J. Edgar Hoover."

Pearl didn't laugh at that; in fact, Garnet's crack about her old boss made her even sadder. She sniffled, though no tears came in her eyes.

"We don't need to fix everything tonight," Garnet said gently. "But being in the same place could help. More important, though...we'll miss you."

Pearl considered this. After several heavy breaths, she collected herself.

For now, it seemed enough that her friends might want her. She wasn't entirely convinced of that, but it was a nice thought.

And God knows that she wanted them.

"I guess I could eat something," Pearl said quietly, looking up at Garnet with an expression mixing sadness and relief.

"Attagirl," Garnet purred. The two clasped hands together for a long moment, happy in their friendship.

"Now let's find you something warm," Garnet said gently, kissing Pearl gently on the forehead as she lifted off the bed. Pearl felt flushed with warmth and happiness.

"Hey, look who's decided to join us!" Amethyst said, bolting to her feet in genuine enthusiasm as Garnet led Pearl onto the beach. Pearl was wearing a light blue shawl around her clothing. She looked thin and gaunt, shivering in the air, her steps unsteady, but the smile on her face was enough to cheer everyone up.

"Took ya long enough, P! We were about to eat all this tasty food for ourselves!" Amethyst joked. Pearl smiled, knowing Amethyst couldn't help being sarcastic, though she chuckled in surprise as
Amethyst came forward to give her a tight hug.

"Well, I wasn't about to let you eat all the food yourself," Pearl teased. "Somebody has to watch you."

"Killjoy!" Amethyst teased, smiling and breaking away from Pearl.

"I made you a piece of chicken," Greg said, handing a burger to Lapis and a charred chicken breast to Peridot, who sniffed it suspiciously. "It's, um, the plain one."

"That's appropriate," Pearl said, using a metal tong to grab the piece off the grill. Amethyst helped herself to two burgers and poured a mountain of ketchup and mustard on her plate. Pearl blanched at the mess, but sat down by Amethyst. And Garnet, smiling, took a piece of chicken and sat down between them.

Greg served himself a burger and a piece of chicken.

"Sorry if I burnt these," Greg apologized. "I'm not the greatest cook."

Amethyst muttered something through mouthfuls of burger.

"Amethyst, please!" Pearl scolded. "Did you forget how to chew?"

Amethyst coughed and swallowed the chunk of meat in her mouth. "Sure did! Maybe you could demonstrate for me, Pearl!"

"When I'm back in full shape, I'll show you the proper way to eat a hamburger," Pearl promised. She traded a glance with Garnet, who flashed her a thumbs-up.

"These burgers taste really good, Greg," Lapis said quietly.

"Well, somebody had to like my cooking some time," Greg said, relieved that the tension seemed to be dissolving.

Pearl took a few tentative bites of her chicken. A bit dry, but not bad.

"So Greg, I think we're all dying to hear your new song," Amethyst prodded him.

"I am!" Lapis said enthusiastically. Peridot forced a smile on her face.

"I'm sure you're as good a musician as you are a cook," Peridot said. Lapis punched her on the shoulder.

Amethyst chortled at that. "Oh, he's even better! This dude's cut, what, four albums?"

"Yeah," Greg said, reaching for his guitar. "Only one of them sold at all."

"Well, your Water Witch did pretty well, as I recall," Pearl said.

Greg nodded gratefully. "Yeah, that's just about the only thing people wanna hear from me. Any time I try anything new...Well, maybe I'm already a has-been. That's a scary thought. I'm in my mid-30s and already peaked. Guess that's show biz."

Undaunted, he started plucking away at his guitar, then started playing a slow, sad melody that sounded unlike anything Pearl or the others had heard him play before.
"Anyway, this is something I put together today," he said. "I call it..." And he caught Pearl's stare, and his voice broke. "...Rose's Song."

Pearl's face suddenly sank into a mournful expression. Garnet and Amethyst exchanged worried glances. Greg pretended not to notice, though her expression stabbed at his heart.

"The lyrics are a little rough, and it doesn't really rhyme or anything," Greg warned. "But, they're from the heart. And I guess that's what counts, right?"

"We'll be the judge of that," Amethyst said, folding her arms skeptically as Greg began.

"We only had a flash
"We only had a moment
"We barely had the time
"To say I love you
"But in that flash
"In that moment
"An eternity of thought
"An infinity of feeling
"Something that would last
"Forever
"Forever
"That moment lasts forever
"And so do we"

At first, Pearl winced at the lyrics. Even more awkward than Greg had anticipated.

But the feeling seemed real. And the melody was quite pleasant.

She pulled her wrap tight around her and leaned forward, her skepticism and hostility melting into curiosity. Then warmth. As her own memories of Rose flooded in along with the song.

"Another moment
"Between you and me
"Would have been great
"But how do you add
"To eternity?"

Pearl saw tears running down Greg's cheek as he sang and played, glowing in the firelight. Then the lyrics faded and he played a simple four-note melody for another forty seconds, until the tempo picked up slightly and Greg's voice rose accordingly.
"You were a star
"That streaked across the sky
"We were lucky
"You and I
"Now you're gone
"And I don't know what to do
"At least I have my memories of you"

Pearl marveled at the sentiment. Thinking that she could have written those lyrics herself. Knowing that she thought the same thing about Rose, and missed her every day. Every minute. Every second. And still couldn't move on.

And for the first time, she realized that Greg was probably the only person who could understand the pain she felt.

As Greg concluded, Amethyst applauded wildly, Lapis with measured enthusiasm, Peridot and Garnet more politely.

Pearl didn't say anything or move. Instead, she shot Greg a guarded, nervous smile and a plaintive nod.

Seeing that, Greg felt like bawling. So much anguish and skittishness and mutual frostiness and resentment, melted just like that. Just at a glance. But he managed to hold it together and gratefully return Pearl's nod.

Maybe, the two of them thought, this could be the start of something better.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the shitty lyrics; I am decidedly not Rebecca Sugar. My one defense is that they're meant to be raw and honest rather than genuinely good.
"Must admit that I'm surprised to see you," Aquamarine said, more interested in her dagger than the woman in front of her. "Word is that you were shot at point-blank range and bled to death. Obviously those reports were mistaken."

"Only half-mistaken," Jasper rasped, then coughed. A deep, hacking cough that brought mucous from her lungs onto a handkerchief.

That Jasper was still alive seemed miracle enough, after Lapis Lazuli shot her in the chest (*Lapis*, of all people! That sick, sorry little *brat*!) and Pearl handily defeated her in swordplay. She *had* lost an awful lot of blood, and in all honesty the past week or so was an indistinguishable blur. She probably couldn't recount what happened to her if she tried.

But she was still here, if not entirely intact. Her chest, already wracked with a cold, wasn't made any better by Lapis's bullet or a week of bleeding and infection. Still, she was walking. And while Jasper wasn't especially religious, she decided it must be for a purpose.

Though Jasper, at this point, felt it was less about saving the country or defeating Communism or saving the Company's face than something much more personal.

"You fucked up, big time," Aquamarine scolded. "You had a very easy mission and a large amount of operatives to play around with. And you get your arse kicked by three women..."

"Four women," Jasper corrected.

"Whatever. *Four* women who are not professional killers or any kind of trained operatives. I'm a *bit* surprised. And just a mite angry."

"You weren't there," Jasper said quietly, fighting down the shame with an excuse. "One woman was an excellent swordfighter..."

"Really?" Aquamarine laughed, spinning her dagger's point towards Jasper. "Swordplay is so eighteenth century!"

"...The other had a shotgun..."

"And you had automatic weapons," Aquamarine reminded her.

"Goddammit, what more do you want me to say?" Jasper roared, her voice breaking as another coughing fit overtook her. "You're not gonna drag a fucking *apology* out of me, Aquamarine," she rasped. "We lost a fight. Against people who were tougher than we expected. That's all there is."

"Really? Tougher than *you*?"

Jasper scowled. Aquamarine seemed to be actively enjoying her subordinate's discomfort and shame.

"We'll see about that," Jasper said quietly.
"You know I don't like giving second chances," Aquamarine said, leaning back and putting her feet on the desk. "If one operative can't do the job, I find another. That's always been my policy. Or, worst case scenario, I do it myself. And I already have someone new helping me on the case."

Jasper arched an eyebrow. She could guess who Aquamarine meant.

"So, why should I give you another chance?" Aquamarine demanded. "I assume that's why you're here and not in hospital."

Jasper considered this for a long moment. She coughed again, quieter this time, as she pondered what to say.

"Because...I'm too far into this," she muttered.

"Excuse me?" Aquamarine said, sitting up and leaning forward to better hear Jasper.

"I've been executing Project DIAMOND for months," Jasper said. "I only have two names left on my list. It would be...it would go against everything I work for to back off now."

"Not good enough," Aquamarine mocked in a sing-song voice.

"All right," Jasper growled. "Fine. I have a score to settle with Lazuli."

Aquamarine grabbed her dagger again and began twirling it in her fingers, suddenly interested.

"Go on," she prodded quietly.

Jasper smiled; she should have known that would have gotten her boss's attention.

"The reason she's on the list, I assume, is because she knows where the third copy of the Family Jewels are," Jasper said. "And I know how she found them. Around the time they were being compiled, someone sent a copy to an office in Shaker Heights, and I was sent to retrieve them. I arrived in Cleveland the night before, expecting it to be a routine, uneventful errand. Until I met a strange girl with blue hair..."

"...Yeah, I kinda dropped out of college. It just didn't seem like my kinda thing, you know."

"You don't say."

"I mean, I've never been that good at school anyway...It just seems like there are better uses of my time than what you learn from books."

Jasper's guard was completely down. That's what surprised her. She'd been with the Agency long enough that she should always have been on guard. Especially when an attractive young woman started chatting with her. When Jasper was younger and prettier, she pulled this off herself, with both men and women. She kicked herself for not seeing it coming.

Still...somehow she couldn't see the fragile, skinny girl with blue hair as any kind of threat. A bit weird, maybe; probably a progressive type who protested about stupid shit. Not Jasper's type, ordinarily. But hell, it had been a long time since anyone had paid Jasper much attention, and she didn't figure on any kind of complications.

At that point, nobody outside the CIA even knew about the Family Jewels. Possibly the White House, though by 1973 Tricky Dick had problems enough not to worry about it. Several copies had been
compiled, filed and relocated to different field offices across the country. Jasper's mission - really the tiniest of errands - was to get a copy that wound up in a small office in Shaker Heights, a sleepy little Cleveland suburb, and return it to Langley. Piece of cake.

So, how could she have suspected anything? What reason did she have? It's not like there were many Russians or Vietcong running around the Midwest. She wasn't really afraid of the Weathermen or any other radical groups, whom she expected she could smell coming from a mile away - if only because they rarely bathed.

That was her mistake. Drinking with a strange woman in a bar the night before a scheduled document pick-up. Espionage 101.

"What are you in town for?"

"Business."

"That's not very helpful," the girl said, with a shy little chuckle and a mischievous smile.

"If you must know, insurance business," Jasper said as she sipped her gin and tonic. "Meeting a big client in Shaker Heights tomorrow."

"Oh really? I'm headed that way, too."

"Oh?" She looked up and down at the girl, dressed in a skimpy blue top with a frilled skirt. She had to admit she enjoyed the view.

"No offense kid," Jasper rasped, "but you don't seem like the type they'd let in the Heights."

"I have friends there," the girl said. "Shaker Heights is more progressive than you think."

"Great."

God she was beautiful. And she had a shy, vulnerable quality that appealed to Jasper, who was anything but those things.

But was she really coming on to Jasper? A much younger woman? In a public, ostensibly heterosexual bar? That was indiscreet, to say the least, especially in Ohio. Which, Jasper knew from experience, was far from America's most progressive area.

Maybe the alcohol went to Jasper's head. Maybe she was stupid. Maybe she was tired and hadn't gotten laid in a long time. Maybe Lapis was just that hot.

But either way, as the conversation pattered on, as the drinks went down, only one idea occupied Jasper's mind.

"My name is, um, Linda Zaffre," the girl offered. Jasper suspected it was a lie, just from that little awkward pause. But didn't care. She figured the girl was a runaway or maybe a small-time crook. Or a hooker. Didn't matter.

"My name is James Shaffer," Jasper said, employing her latest alias. "Yeah, I know what you're thinking, James is a weird name for a woman..."

"No, it's fine! It's...unique." And "Linda" flashed Jasper a smile that melted any further resistance she had.
“So, uh, Linda,” Jasper said, taking one more drink to fortify herself before making the move. “Do you have a place to stay tonight?”

“Linda” flashed another smile.

The next morning, Jasper woke up with a hangover in a hotel room. And read a newspaper article, once she lurched out of bed, that someone had burned down the CIA office in Shaker Heights, killing two people.

It didn’t take much effort to put two-and-two together. Jasper had been played, like a mark or a shave tail.

And God knows what became of the Jewels. Just possibly they were destroyed, a setback but forgivable. Or someone had them.

It didn’t take too long, either, for Jasper to find out who Linda Zaffre really was. And not long for her to start imagining the horrible things she’d do to the young honeypot if she ever caught up with her.

But she had evidently been trained well by her handlers, because she disappeared completely off the radar. Jasper had too many things going on to devote to tracking her down.

Until Project DIAMOND. And now that she’d come so close to completing it, she could now focus herself on ridding the world of Lapis Lazuli. Of punishing a sinner for her endless, assorted, sordid misdeeds.

Why else would she still be alive? God meant for her to complete this mission. It was just Pearl White’s bad luck to be part of it, too.

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Beach City, DV

"Sorry we didn't get to spend much time together today," Peridot said to Lapis as they bolted up to the bedroom. "It's just been...man, I'm acting like I even still have a job and the Senator will even care what I have to say about anything any more. But, holy crap Lapis, Pearl told me pretty much her whole story! And it's a total scoop! The people have to know about all the heinous things the FBI got away with over the years, one way or the other!"

"Maybe not all the things," Lapis said airily.

Peridot scowled. "You need to stop talking like that," she said.

"Like what?" Lapis asked.

"All cryptic and foreboding. Look Lapis..." Peridot sat on their bed and clasped Lapis's hands.

"You know how I feel about you, and...I think you feel the same way about me. Or, you do a very good job pretending. And that's great! So I'm not going to take advantage of you, or make you talk about anything you did or didn't do. Certainly I'm not going to make you testify or go public. But please, stop talking like you have some dread secret you want to get off your chest. It's annoying and it makes me want to ask when I'm trying so hard not to."

Lapis didn't know what to say about that.

"Yeah, sorry," Lapis offered lamely. "Guess I shouldn't be, um, priming the pump."
"You really shouldn't," Peridot agreed.

"I promise you, Perry, we will talk," Lapis said, as sincerely as she should. "I'll at least let you know what you need to know...for your own sake. Then we'll go from there. It's just...the time needs to be right, you know? I don't want to scare you off with anything I've done when we're still getting to know each other."

Lapis put a hand on Peridot's shoulder. Peridot smiled, but couldn't help noticing the scar on Lapis's wrist again.

"Okay," Peridot said.

"Hey lovebirds, you turning in early?" Amethyst poked her head in the door. "It's only midnight!"

"Only midnight?" Peridot said, raising an eyebrow.

"I mean, the night's still young and all that jazz," Amethyst said, apparently wired from the party. "Don't tell me you guys are already sleepy! Guess it's a bit different from your nine-to-five deal though, right?"

"Ha! When I worked for Senator Dewey" (Peridot was a little surprised to be referring to that in the past tense...but she went with it) "I would function on like four hours of sleep every day!"

"And look where that got you," Amethyst teased, ruffling Peridot's hair. Peridot growled.

"What about you, Lapis? You up for some tunes?" Amethyst bolted outside and downstairs, with Lapis and Peridot following cautiously after her.

"Too bad Greg doesn't drink," Lapis said. "All that soda must have gone straight to her head."

"I saw her sneak a beer or two when we got back," Peridot whispered, watching Amethyst shake her booty to nonexistent music.

Finally, she put a record on the turntable. Soon the sounds of Carly Simon started blaring through the beach house.

"Amethyst, please!" Pearl yelled from her room. "It's way too late to play that racket!"

Garnet just walked downstairs past Lapis and Peridot and unplugged the record player. Amethyst yelped and grabbed her friend's arm.

"Aww, come on Garnet! You can't be tired."

"I'm always tired," Garnet said, though she looked as awake as ever. "Dealing with all your mess is a full-time job."

"I never knew you felt that way about me," Amethyst pouted.

"You're just high on sugar and alcohol," Garnet said. "Which can be better than dealing with Pearl..."

"Guess so," Amethyst said, still dancing until she fell backwards into a chair.

"You must have really done a number on her to get her to come out with us," Amethyst said.

"No more than I do with you," Garnet said, sitting down on the couch and rubbing her temples.
"You girls don't give me much chance to relax, I'll tell you that much."

"Well, you do a good job of keeping things together," Amethyst said, walking over to Garnet and patting her shoulder. Then she belched in her friend's face.

"It's a constant struggle," Garnet growled under her breath, before standing back up.

"In any case, time to get up to your room." She put her hands on her hips and stood over Amethyst, adopting a tone and stance more familiar in Pearl than her. "You can dance or whatever you like up there, but it's too late to be messing around like this."

"Thanks, Mom," Amethyst groaned, rushing up the stairs.

"Good night Perry, Lappy," she said to their guests. "Guess the fun's over before it really started."

"It's...Lapis," Lapis said, unamused by Amethyst's nickname.

Peridot snickered. "Lappy...I'll have to remember that one."

"You do that and I'll never, ever speak to you again," Lapis said in a deadpan, deathly serious voice. Then the two burst out laughing and rushed back into the bedroom together.

"Good night, you two," Garnet said, smiling as the couple disappeared. Then she sat back down on the couch and leaned back, sighing. She didn't see Greg come in until he plopped down next to her on the couch.

"Wiped out, huh?" he offered. "Yeah, I could use some shut eye."

"Sorry, I forgot you were sleeping down here..."

"It's cool. I feel like kinda the fourth wheel around here...well, I guess it's fourth wheel on a tricycle? Maybe I should think of a better analogy."

"Or set it to music," Garnet joked. "You know, you're welcome to the bed I've been using..."

Greg waved her off.

"You know," he said, looking up at the ceiling. "Thank you for whatever you said to Pearl."

Garnet nodded in response.

"I mean, a smile and a look isn't much, but...it's better than nothing."

"It's a start," Garnet agreed, standing up. "You're both good people who loved Rose. You should be friends."

"Friends?" Greg didn't quite buy it, though at least that finally seemed like a possibility.

"Maybe someday," he muttered, closing his eyes and laying back.

"Good night, Greg, and thanks for the chicken," Garnet said, starting upstairs.

"Oh wait," Greg said, sitting back up. "Damn, I forgot something." He went over to the kitchen table and grabbed a small manila envelope.
"Saw this when I came in, but forgot to give it to you," he said. "Addressed to Garnet. No return address."

"Hmm." Garnet said. She started back upstairs, carrying the envelope in one hand as she moved. Greg turned over on his side and pulled a blanket over his head. Garnet turned the light out, casting the room into darkness.

Garnet left the hallway light on for now. She heard Lapis and Peridot laughing and whispering in their room, and smiled thinking about how nice it was to be in love, and hoping she'd know that feeling again someday. Amethyst, strangely, was silent, and Garnet wondered if she'd passed out or just run out of energy.

The door to Pearl's room was still cracked open. Garnet went inside and saw Pearl with a lamplight on, reading an issue of *Reader's Digest*.

"Pearl, do you need anything?" she asked, poking her head in the door.

"I'm fine, Garnet," Pearl assured her. "Just getting a little light reading before I go to sleep."

"*Reader's Digest*? Talk about light reading!"

"Hey, they have an excerpt from Teddy White's new book..."

"Thrilling. Well, you know where I am if you need me."

"Of course. Good night, Garnet, and...Thank you."

Garnet shot Pearl a thumbs up and retired to her room, quietly closing the door behind her. She'd almost forgotten the envelope until she was alone.

She tore the end open and saw that it contained a small piece of paper which fell onto the floor.

She bent down and picked it up. It wasn't paper.

It was a tarot card.

She recognized it as The Tower: a large building in peril, being struck by lightning, fire emanating from the windows, several hapless human figures falling or jumping out to escape. She knew roughly what it meant, a portent of danger. And she could certainly guess *who* sent it.

More than anything, she knew that their peaceful interlude in Beach City was finally nearing its end.
Surprises

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who's still reading and especially everyone leaving kudos and comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October 4, 1975

For once, Peridot woke up earlier than Lapis. She and her black-haired beauty were still tangled together amidst the sheets, and Peridot thought briefly of nudging her awake. Until she thought about how hard Lapis usually found it just to fall asleep...and decided to leave her alone.

Maybe it was a good sign.

Peridot kissed Lapis on the forehead, then showered, dressed and went downstairs. She poured herself a bowl of cereal, more concerned right now with a way to keep herself in Lapis's good graces.

Amethyst was already awake, though for a change she wasn't listening to music or eating. Instead she was reclining on the couch, thumbing through a magazine and looking utterly bored...the optimal state for playful mischief.

"What's up, Perry?" she asked.

"Still thinking."

"About Lapis?" Amethyst asked. "I'm guessing you two..." She gestured lewdly with her index fingers.

"That's none of your business," Peridot mumbled, lowering her eyes and blushing.

"Ha ha, fine!" Amethyst said, sitting up and throwing aside her magazine. "Whatever you say, Perry."

Peridot groaned and ate another spoonful of cereal. It was hard enough trying to sort all this out without Amethyst teasing her about it.

"I want to do something nice for her," Peridot said, not making eye contact.

"Sounds like you did something nice for her last night..."

"Amethyst, I'm serious!" Peridot shouted, louder than she intended. She cleared her throat and modulated her voice, trying to hide her embarrassment.

"Thinking of a present," Peridot continued. "A surprise. Something...to make her happy. She seems to be doing better lately, and...I want to help."

"P, I'd say you're the reason she's feeling better," Amethyst reminded her. "And I don't just mean in
that way, either."

"Maybe. But...I mean, all that is...nice. And fun." A smile flickered across her face, then vanished. "But anyone can do that," she insisted, waving her hand dismissively. "I'm thinking of something that shows real thought and concern and...I guess that she doesn't know about."

"I get ya," Amethyst said. Trying to think. "What does Lapis like?"

Peridot sat back, puzzling this out. "Well, she loves music," she said. "But I doubt we could find a record that she doesn't already own."

"Doesn't hurt to try," Amethyst said, hanging upside off the couch.

"Oh, wait, she told me...she said she likes to paint! Yes! Back in college she was really into art, but hasn't had a chance to practice lately!" And Peridot became animated and jabbering, as she usually did when a stroke of genius inspired her.

"And what better a place to paint than the beach? I mean, the sunsets alone...and the waves breaking against the shore...She wouldn't even need talent to capture it! Of course, I'm sure that she's amazingly talented...Not that I've ever seen her work of course, but..."

"Whoa," Amethyst said quietly during a lull in Peridot's monologue, sitting up and brushing the hair out of her face. "Sounds to me like you've got it bad."

Peridot blushed again, but didn't deny it.

Garnet entered the room from upstairs.

"How's Pearl doing?" Amethyst asked.

"She's still asleep," Garnet said. "I think last night really took it out of her."

"Bad news," Amethyst sympathized. She sighed, her face suddenly creased with worry.

"I don't like seeing her like this," she admitted. "It...doesn't feel right. She's such a strong lady..."

And her voice trailed off.

Garnet's heart sank hearing Amethyst talk that. She was usually the joker and the silly one, but she'd been acting more and more serious lately. Which didn't strike Garnet as a good sign.

"She'll be better soon enough," Garnet assured Amethyst with a smile, though she couldn't hide the worry in her eyes. Amethyst seemed skeptical, but returned the smile.

"Well...Perry's preparing to go Lapis shopping," Amethyst teased.

"I dunno," Peridot said. "I was thinking about it..."

"No, you were," Amethyst insisted, wanting to move the discussion back to a lighter subject. "Don't chicken out now! There's, like, no better way to show her how you feel than to buy her a paint set! Get her back on the road to being normal and okay instead of...whatever mess she is now."

"I suppose that would be a benefit," Peridot considered. "You know what...you're right."

"I'm...not sure that's a good idea," Garnet said quietly. Amethyst noticed a serious look again overtaking her face.
"Why wouldn't it be?" Peridot asked, warming to the idea while misunderstanding Garnet's comment. "I think I've finally got Lapis to start coming out of her shell! And maybe it will help her un-shell herself further by reintroducing her to her hidden passion."

"Maybe Amethyst should go with you," Garnet suggested, shooting the younger woman a glance.

"Yeah, why not?" Amethyst said with a shrug. "Guess it would be nice to see something other than the inside of this beach house."

Garnet nodded and opened her wallet.

"Here's about $100," she said. "Spend it all in one place, if you can."

"Wow, thanks!" Peridot said. Then she looked around and panicked. "Oh crap, my coat is upstairs...do you think...?"

"Don't worry about it," Amethyst said, completely deadpan. "If Lapis wakes up, tell her you can't stand her anymore and you're running away forever."

Peridot stared at her for a long moment, blinking heavily. Not sure if Amethyst was joking or not. Until Amethyst blew her a raspberry.

"Ha ha, what a great joke," Peridot groaned. She slowly ascended the stairs.

"Do we need to talk, G?" Amethyst whispered to Garnet as soon as Peridot was out of sight.

"Not right now," Garnet assured her. "Perhaps later. You should keep an eye on Peridot and I'll watch Pearl and Lapis. Better safe than sorry."

Amethyst hesitated a moment, not entirely satisfied by that answer. Then she nodded affirmation and rushed upstairs into her room.

Once she reached her room, she fished around for her Colt .45, finding it under the bed. She couldn't find her holster, so she hurriedly jammed it in her waistband before throwing on her coat.

Garnet crumpled the tarot card in her pocket.

She hadn't told anyone about it, not even Greg, who'd found it. It didn't seem the right time.

She realized what it meant: Sapphire was sending her a warning. Someone was coming soon, preparing to wreak havoc on them.

But who? Jasper was almost certainly dead. Yet...surely the CIA, or whoever ran this Project DIAMOND, wasn't lacking for operatives. For all Garnet knew, an entire company of Green Berets could be descending on Beach City.

She sat up all night worrying about it, shotgun at her side. Expecting an army or a hit squad to burst in the door any minute, guns blazing. She wasn't the only one awake - Peridot and Lapis made quite the racket in their room, doing what lovers did, and Pearl mumbled and tossed and turned in her sleep, creaking her bed springs as she moved. And she wondered how anyone ever could ever sleep without a fan or air conditioner or something blocking out all the riff-raff.

At some point she fell asleep, and woke up finding that everyone was still there and the world still spun. But she felt only marginally better.
After wrestling with the idea for awhile, she decided not to tell her friends about Sapphire's message. She knew she was taking a big risk...one that wasn't entirely fair to everyone else. They always insisted upon trusting each other...yet always seemed to keep something from each other.

Well, I don't want to alarm anyone until I know what's going on, Garnet reasoned to herself. We should know what we're up against before we get ready. Maybe Amethyst can scout around town and take a look while she's helping Peridot. Or maybe I can do some investigating while I'm in town.

_Until then, Garnet thought, better safe than sorry._

She just hoped that she'd made the right call.

"Whoa, Perry, slow down!" Amethyst called. "I've never seen you move so fast!"

It's true. Peridot, who just moments before had been reluctant to do anything, was practically running - _skipping, even!_ - down the beach.

"There's no time to waste!" Peridot insisted, slowing down just enough to catch her breath. "Lapis needs her paint supplies!"

Amethyst shook her head. She wished she could be _that_ in love, that something so trivial could seem so important.

But, Amethyst reasoned, it's not trivial at all. Not if it helps someone rebuild their life.

She thought of all the times that music made her happy. Just finding the right record or tape or radio station could be enough to stave off stress or despair or even a bout of depression. That was one thing she and Lapis had in common.

She'd always struggled to express herself, though. She took a few dance classes during her down time, but for some reason they didn't take. And fighting, while requiring skill and poise and occasionally even enjoyable in its own way, wasn't quite the same thing.

She was glad that she could help Lapis and Peridot work through their problems. She knew enough from personal experience to read it in Lapis's eyes and voice and body language. And she knew Peridot, God bless her, wasn't going to be denied in trying to fix her.

She did wonder, though, what would happen over time. Their little vacation couldn't last forever. And frankly, Amethyst didn't want it to. As much as she enjoyed spending time with her friends, she was beyond bored.

And her little conversation with Garnet didn't bode well, especially considering how vague it was. She wished she were a better shot with her pistol, or that it was easier to conceal a whip on her person.

Would Lapis and Peridot still be a couple once this mess ended? She was a little surprised that she cared so much about two people she barely knew, but there it was. Since the TV didn't work, it was like enjoying her own private soap opera.

She also thought about Pearl, and she could do to help her feel better.

Amethyst was so lost in her thoughts that she barely noticed Peridot had stopped sprinting. Now she stood on the beach and chatted with a woman Amethyst didn't recognize.
Amethyst was immediately put on guard; she moved the pistol over to her right hip and undid the safety before approaching. She forced a smile and waved.

"Hey Perry, already making new friends?" she called, as cheerfully as she could manage.

"Oh yeah, this is my friend Amethyst," Peridot said to the woman.

Amethyst looked the woman over. She was tall and well-built with very short blonde hair, wearing a white-and-orange running outfit and was sweating. Despite looking bodybuilder tough, she had a very pleasant countenance which made Amethyst feel...a little safer.

"Amethyst, that's such a pretty name!" the woman said. "I'm Topaz. Topaz Gutierrez."

"Gutierrez, huh?" Amethyst asked. "De donde es tu familia?"

"Mi familia es de Guatemala," Topaz replied. "Pero mi español es una mierda, así que tal vez hablemos inglés?"

Amethyst burst out laughing. "Okay, fair enough! Sorry, there aren't too many Hispanics in this part of the world, so...my family's Puerto Rican."

"Oh, interesting," Topaz said, smiling politely.

"Where are you from?" Amethyst asked.

"California originally, but I've been living in Arlington, Virginia the last few years."

"No kidding! We're all from DC."

"No way! Government employees?"

"Umm, in a manner of speaking," Amethyst said, not wanting to give away too much. "At least Perry here is."

"I'm kind of a big deal," Peridot boasted half-seriously. She wanted to say more, until Amethyst's glare convinced her to shut up.

"Yeah?" Topaz said. "Well, I'm just a paper-pusher at the Department of Agriculture. Like there aren't enough of those in the capital."

"Hey, somebody's gotta push all that paper around," Amethyst said.

"Beats starving to death."

"I guess!"

"Plus somebody's gotta keep Earl Butz in line."

"Ha, Butz."

Peridot stood to the side, feeling a little confused and left out as the two new acquaintances bantered.

"So you guys are staying at the beach house outside town?" Topaz asked.

"Who wants to know?" Peridot interrupted.

"Hey, it's no big deal!" Topaz said. "It's just, I've been here before and I saw that house. It looked
pretty neat. Didn't realize you guys occupied it."

"Well, our friend Greg...He kinda rents the place," Amethyst lied.

"He invited us over for a few weekends," Peridot added.

"Us?"

"Yeah, just some of our friends from DC," Amethyst said. "No biggie. Need to get away from the capital for awhile, ya know?"

"Huh. Well, I'm only gonna be in town until Monday, then back to the old grind. But yeah, maybe we can meet up for drinks or something before I go?"

"Sounds cool," Amethyst agreed, smiling.

"Why not now?" Peridot offered. "We're just going to town for...um, shopping!"

"Yep, a girl's day on the town!" Amethyst said, pulling Peridot close.

Topaz shook her head. "Appreciate the offer, but...nah, I've got some more running to do. Bit behind on my exercise and..." She turned and faced the ocean.

"My God, I love the beach."

"Well hey, awesome to meet you!" Amethyst said, waving. "See ya soon!"

"Sure thing!" Topaz said. "I'm staying at the hotel in town, so...look me up."

"Will do!" And then Amethyst and Peridot started walking down the beach, before Peridot took off sprinting again. Amethyst's raspy laugh pealed through the air.

Topaz waited until the two girls were out of sight before she started running again. And didn't stop until she reached the beach house.

She saw Greg's van parked underneath the patio. And saw Garnet through the window.

She quickly sized the building up as she caught her breath, taking as many mental notes as she could. Then turned the other way and ran back into town.

Lapis woke up as Peridot prepared to run out the door, but didn't move. She half-wanted to spring out of bed and yell boo at Peridot, or something equally silly, but restrained herself. She could tell that the little blonde had something going on, something she didn't want to share with her.

Her first thought was that Peridot had abandoned her, and felt the familiar stab of betrayal well up in her chest. But she managed to tamp it down.

Peridot's not like that, Lapis told herself. She wouldn't just leave. Even that night at the hotel, she stayed. That's something *I* would do, not her.

Which ended up making her feel worse. She didn't need to remind herself what a shitty person she was.

Her main concern, though, was a little different. She still hadn't told Peridot the complete, unvarnished truth about herself, and why she was on the run, and why people were trying so hard to
kill her.

Mostly because it was hard to put it into words.

Suddenly, an idea struck her.

She grabbed a pen and a piece of paper out of the drawer and began writing a confession. Hoping that she could put her thoughts and deeds into understandable words.

*Maybe it's better this way, Lapis reasoned. Maybe it's better if I spell everything out in as much detail as I can. At the very least, it will let me practice what I need to say. Try and condense everything in one place.)*

She hoped Peridot wouldn't get back before she was done.

"This is Topaz. I found them. They're all staying at a beach house just outside Beach City."

"Really? All of them are there?"

"Yes. Miss White, Miss Lazuli, Miss Khoury and...the other two women. There's also a man, I think he's a musician...Two of them went out."

"Which two?"

"Peridot Khoury and...one of the other ones. That means our targets are still inside."

"Good news. Keep an eye out. We can be there in about two hours, unless there's traffic."

"Two hours?"

"Yes."

"That, um, seems a bit abrupt. You sure you don't want some more time to plan things out?"

"We've put this off long enough. Might as well strike while the iron's hot and especially now, since you said the other two are out."

"But I don't know how long they'll be..."

"We'll be down there in two hours. Meet us in the hotel lobby and we'll go from there."

Topaz listened to the phone go dead and hung up. She went out into the hotel bar and ordered a club soda. Then sat there, watching businessmen and older couples move through the lobby, oblivious as Topaz mused about everything that brought her here.

She really didn't want to be here. Really didn't want to do this awful mission. But she had a past with Aquamarine, who called in her chits at the most inopportune occasions. Such as now.

Her only consolation was that she was dealing with criminals. Traitors, even. She could take solace in the fact that she wasn't doing bad things to good people.

Though she wondered, based on their conversation, how bad these women could really be.

*I might need something stronger than this,* Topaz mused while pondering the drink in her hand. *Even if it's only noon.*
But first, I need to shower.

Chapter End Notes

At this point, I'm half-seriously considering whether it would be worthwhile to try reshaping this fanfic into an original story or novel. Obviously that will have to wait until it's done, and might take a lot of work to file the SU serial numbers off, but...it's a possibility. Would be interested to hear any thoughts from my regular readers.

Either way, I'm planning a hiatus until Monday as Real Life intervenes. Have a great weekend and thanks again for your time and comments!
Thanks to miseryroot and fuzzy_mctiger for your reviews and encouragement on the last chapter! We'll finish this story as a fanfic first and see where things go from there! This is another fairly violent chapter, as fair warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October 4, 1975

Lapis heard the commotion out front - the smash of the front door slamming open, the shouting and threats from voices that seemed vaguely familiar. Still, she didn't move until she heard a loud gunshot.

She threw down her pen and paper and instinctively searched for her weapon. Then she remembered that she'd dropped her pistol at the site of her last fight. And cursed herself for being so stupid. Then remembered that she'd been barely conscious during that fight. As if that mattered.

Desperately, as she heard the sounds of fighting breaking out, she searched the room for something that she could use for a weapon. She didn't want to run again. Didn't want to abandon her new friends to be hurt, or worse, by her enemies. She had done enough people enough harm that she couldn't stand it.

But there wasn't anything. Not a knife or a baseball bat or club or scissors or anything. Just a few pens and pencils, maybe the lamp, but what good would that do?

Terror and guilt, self-preservation and friendship battled within her heart as she heard the sound of punches and kicks and bodies thudding against the walls and floors. Eventually, self-preservation won out.

She felt an awful squeezing sensation in her chest. Then closed her eyes and fled towards the window.

Carefully, she started lowering herself down. It was a few feet off the ground, but not high enough that it should hurt her. And really, what was a minor injury compared to getting killed?

And what's getting killed compared to abandoning more people? another part of her brain asked.

Again she wrestled with the guilt. Again adrenaline and fear and cowardice and selfishness forced her to start climbing down.

She took a deep breath, and started lowering her legs down towards the sand.

And felt someone grab her ankles as she descended from the window. And felt her blood run cold.

She looked down...

And stared into Jasper's leering face.
It happened so quickly that Garnet barely had a chance to react.

The door blasted open. Two figures stepped hurriedly into the beach house, one a tall, hulking woman, the other a shorter, nicely dressed lady.

"Hello, love," the shorter woman said in a British accent. "Where's Pearl? And where's Lazuli?"

Instinctively, Garnet reached for her shotgun.

The short woman sighed and gestured to her sidekick. Who obediently rushed forward and grabbed Garnet's gun, pushing her against the wall.

Her gun discharged into the ceiling, sprinkling both of them with bits of wood. And Topaz punched Garnet in the face, sending her flying backwards.

"You can make this hard if you want," Aquamarine said, folding her arms and leaning against the door, watching the action with mild, detached interest. "But we're going to get what we came here for eventually."

"You're not going to hurt my friends," Garnet shouted, dodging another blow from Topaz, then smashing her in the gut with the butt of her shotgun.

Aquamarine just smiled and started examining her nails. She was willing to let Topaz do the hard work.

Indeed, she initially seemed more than a match for Garnet. Recovering quickly from the blow, she struck Garnet across the face and in the chest, then tore the gun away from her and tossed it across the room. This left her open, and Garnet responded by punching her in the collar bone. A glancing blow that hurt Garnet's fist more than her target.

Topaz smirked, grabbed Garnet's arm and tossed her back against the staircase. A picture fell off the wall and crashed down next to her head.

"Nicely done," Aquamarine complemented Topaz, who took a moment to regain her breath. The shorter woman calmly started walking towards the staircase, until Garnet sat up and kicked her in the midsection.

"Oof!" Aquamarine fell back, feeling the breath crushed out of her. She stood up and started to charge but felt a spasm of pain and collapsed.

"Take this bitch out!" she croaked to Topaz, who obeyed and rushed forward, spoiling for a fight.

Pearl heard the commotion. Instinctively she bolted to her feet and rushed across the room towards her sword. Adrenaline and shock carried her at first...Then the pain from her injuries kicked in. Her stomach seemed to rip back open and all the familiar pain came crashing back down upon her.

Pearl groaned in agony and collapsed to the floor. She curled up in a ball, listening to the sounds of fighting down below, helpless as her friend fought for her life, blotting out the physical pain with mental anguish.

She hoped that Amethyst would return. She prayed that Greg and Lapis and Peridot would be okay.

And, more than anything, she wished that Garnet (and Rose, whose picture stared down benignly at her from the dresser) could forgive her for being weak.
By now, Garnet was bleeding and bruised, her muscles growing stiff and sore, her injuries starting to pile up. Every movement of her limbs sent a stab of pain shooting through her body. But she had enough adrenaline coursing through her that she was able to dust herself off and fight.

And, she noticed, Topaz seemed to be tiring herself out. Hitting Garnet with her fiercest blows and strongest moves in an effort to bring a quick knock-out. But Garnet had a great second wind, and anything short of breaking her back wouldn't deter her from fighting.

She just had to wait.

She wasn't too worried about Aquamarine, who still hadn't recovered from being kicked, who had propped herself up against a far wall. Her disinterested expression from earlier had been replaced with a hateful glare, wishing that she could join in.

Well, let her wish.

Topaz, now sore and covered in sweat, raised herself back up to full height and walked back over to Garnet. She struck Garnet again, this time in the chest. Garnet felt another stab of pain, feared that her ribs had been cracked, but it felt like a much weaker blow than before. She smiled sardonically.

"Is that everything you've got?" she taunted, standing up as if unfazed. Her smile infuriated Topaz, who lunged forward to punch her again...only for Garnet to dodge the blow, grab Topaz's arm and smash her into the wall.

Topaz sunk to the ground with a groan and a thud. To Garnet's surprise, and delight, she didn't move or even try to get back up. She just laid there, utterly exhausted.

"Nice try, friend," Garnet said, with as much hauteur as she could muster, under the circumstances. "But I don't think you'll be hurting anyone else today..."

"And neither will you," another voice chirped.

Garnet didn't have a chance to react. She felt an electric shock in her leg, moving rapidly up her body and short circuiting her nervous system, discombobulating her brain. It lasted so long, became so intense that she barely even felt it after the first few moments.

Once it finally stopped, she felt her limbs spasm, her heart and breathing wildly irregular. She tried propping herself up against a wall, but couldn't.

She took a breath, too heavy, and gave out. She faded to black as her body crumpled to the floor.

"Sometimes I don't know why I bother," Aquamarine gloated, standing over Garnet and putting away her prod. She looked down at Topaz, who writhed on the ground in agony.

"Sorry, old friend," she said with a smile. "You tried."

She reached down, as if to pull Topaz on her feet. Instead, she just patted the woman on her wrist and broke away.

"But now," she said darkly, looking upstairs and listening to Pearl, "it's my turn."

Fighting through the pain from Garnet's blow, Aqamarine took a moment to rebutton her blouse and straighten a few strands of her then started up the stairs. She slowly drew her dagger from her coat...
"If it were up to me, brat, I would kill you right here," Jasper said, pulling Lapis into her arms. "It's the least I could do after what you've given me..."

As if on cue, she suffered another coughing fit. Lapis blanched in disgust as she felt a hunk of phlegm land on her shirt. And looked down, and saw a glob of Jasper's scarlet blood now matted over her chest.

Lapis felt a wave of nausea rise through her body. She might have fainted, if it weren't for Jasper.

"Unfortunately for me," Jasper croaked, wiping off her mouth, "Aquamarine has other plans. Guess she still thinks you have the Jewels somewhere."

"I don't," Lapis said quietly.

"Maybe not," Jasper said, pulling Lapis so close that she could smell the thug's reeking, rotting breath. "But you'll have to convince her of that. And God help you if you can't."

She started pulling Lapis away. Lapis managed to break free, recoiling as Jasper turned back towards her, seeming amused by her defiance.

"Well, there will be plenty of time for that," she hissed. "But for now, there is one thing I've wanted to do for you for a long, long time..."

Before Lapis could react, Jasper pulled her close again. And kissed her. On the lips. Hard.

Lapis bit Jasper's tongue, forcing the thug to pull away in pain.

Jasper reeled backwards, chuckling, savoring the taste of blood in her mouth. She relished the terrified look in Lapis's eyes, all her defiance and toughness vanished in a moment of horror.

"Still the same brat as always," Jasper muttered.

Then Jasper punched Lapis in the breadbasket. So hard, she instantly blacked out, collapsing helplessly into Jasper's arms.

It took Pearl several minutes of breathing deeply, of fighting down the physical pain and the mental torment, to will herself onto her feet.

She was not going to let Garnet face the threat, whatever it was, alone. If she had to die, too, so be it.

She shakily raised herself. Took another look at Rose's picture in an effort to steel herself. Drew her sword, even though the very act was enough to send a stab of pain rippling through her belly.

Nonetheless she managed to regain control. She took another breath, closed her eyes, raised her sword against her forehead and took several contemplative thoughts, trying to regain a fighting mindset.

_You can do this_, Pearl, she said. _You have to do this. Do it for her. Do it for them. Do it for yourself._

She had just opened her eyes, preparing to move out, when the door slowly swung up. Pearl gasped.

And saw Aquamarine standing in the doorway, looking for all the world like an innocent child. Except that she bore signs of a fight - bruises and sweat and a rumpled blouse, which she absentely tried to pad down with a free hand.
And, Pearl noticed, she held a large, shiny dagger in the other hand.

"Pearl White?" she asked.

Pearl took two steps backward, bracing her sword for a fight.

"What a pleasure to meet you at last," Aquamarine said, teasingly, looking Pearl up and down in her shabby sick outfit and unruly hair and skin smeared with sweat and old make-up.

"I've always wondered if the stories about you were true," she continued, taking a cautious step forward. "A middling, note-typing clerk becomes a sword fighting vigilante. What a remarkable transformation indeed! Now I see that the rumors are remarkably accurate. Although," she said, clicking her tongue mockingly, "not quite as glamorous as I might have hoped."

"What have you done with Garnet?" Pearl demanded in a loud but shaky voice.

"What have I done with her?" Aquamarine asked, acting confused. "She's unconscious. A decision she made...consciously. Ha, do you see what I did there? Clever, right?"

"Stand back or I'll carve you into bits," Pearl warned.

"Possibly," Aquamarine shrugged. "But I don't think so. You don't seem quite as intimidating as you might have been. Guess Jasper did a number on you."

She took another step towards Pearl, who instinctively moved her sword into a parry position.

"Should make my work easier then," Aquamarine said quietly, regarding her dagger's shining hilt.

"I have spent my life despising fascism and everything it stands for," she muttered reflectively. "But they at least got one thing right."

She looked up from the blade, shooting Pearl a look of utter, sincere hatred and contempt.

"They knew how to deal with traitors."

After spitting out the word with audible venom, she moved forward with shocking quickness. Pearl slashed at Aquamarine, missing her, and cried out as Aquamarine slashed into her stomach.

Pearl fell backwards with an anguished cry. She reached down and felt fresh blood spilling out of her wound, watching the red stain her finger tips.

So far it looked only like a glancing blow. But now she was all but helpless as the shorter woman approached with her dagger poised to strike.

"And now, Pearl White," Aquamarine said in a calm, quiet voice, "it has been a rare pleasure knowing you. But it is time for you to meet a traitor's death..."

Pearl watched as the shining blade arced in the air over her head. She couldn't move, couldn't blink, as if she were hypnotized by the sight. By the thought of her own impending death.

She waited for it to strike.

Instead, she heard another loud gunshot, so close that it made her ears short out. And saw Aquamarine fly across the room, propelled by the blast.

Pearl felt a few small pellets sting her cheeks and necks. But they were nothing compared to the pain
coursing through her stomach.

And the terrifying realization that she couldn't hear anything. Her ears were still ringing from the blast.

She could still see, though, and watched Aquamarine stumbling back to her feet, muttering something Pearl couldn't hear at an unseen party.

She wondered how on Earth the woman could have survived a close-range blast like that. Then realized Garnet must have loaded her shells with rock salt or something again.

Aquamarine flew backwards again, propelled by another shot which Pearl could only dimly hear, though she could instantly smell the smoke. And to her shock, Aquamarine flew out a window, crashing through the glass, out onto the porch below.

Pearl swiveled her head and saw, to her surprise, Greg. Holding Garnet's shotgun in his hands, as if shocked by his own actions.

"PEARL!" she could hear the dim echo of his voice punctuate the ringing. "Are you alright? What happened to you...?"

"Greg," she muttered, managing to smile.

A smile that only lasted a moment. As she saw Topaz appear and knock Greg unconscious with a blow to his neck.

Pearl couldn't hear anything but felt the vibrations of Greg's body hitting the floor. And watched the towering woman appear over her.

Pearl gasped, watching as she raised a pistol towards Pearl, aiming it directly between her eyes.

This time, she closed her eyes.

Aquamarine was flat on her back when she heard the gunshots inside. Two rounds, then a third which seemed to shatter a lamp or glass or something.

She was more shocked than hurt. Shocked that the shotgun blast hadn't sawed her in half. Amazed that she hadn't plummeted to her death after falling out the window, though her back landing hard on wood planks wasn't exactly a picnic. She was sure that, given a few hours for adrenaline to wear off, her back would be stiff and sore, or worse for days. And she figured she'd be picking pellets and glass shards out from her clothes and skin roughly as long.

Still, it might be the first time in a long while that Aquamarine was happy to be tiny.

Slowly, painfully, she raised herself to her feet. She leaned against the railing and looked down at the beach, seeing their car waiting below.

Then, to her satisfaction, she saw Jasper carrying an unconscious Lapis Lazuli forward. She put her down on the sand and opened the car door.

"Is she alive?" Aquamarine called, even though shouting sent stabs of pain through her throat. Must have been some glass, or maybe I landed on it?

"She's fine," Jasper said, just barely audible, as she stuffed the unconscious girl into a seat. Then she
looked up and saw Aquamarine's battered form and the shattered window, and smiled.

"Looks like you're the one who ran into trouble," Jasper smirked, relishing Aquamarine's discomfort.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," the short woman said coolly. She looked down and saw a jagged shard of glass in her arm. She winced as she pulled it out and flicked it aside.

"Yeah, you're a tough little broad, if nothing else," Jasper said.

"And don't you forget it," Aquamarine answered as another gunshot rang out.

Pearl looked askance as Topaz put away her pistol. She had fired twice into Pearl's bed, and a third shot at the dresser lamp. Then she bent down next to Pearl, so close that she could see the blood and sweat matting her face.

"Listen," she said, her voice still barely audible over the ringing in Pearl's ears. "Don't chase after us. Find the Jewels. I don't know where they are..." And her voice cut out. "...Follow the Jewels. Find where they are, and meet us there..." More ringing.

Pearl nodded dumbly, not sure what the woman meant, or what was happening, or why she was still alive.

Topaz nodded in affirmation, then said something else Pearl couldn't hear - she thought it might have been "Good luck." Then she fired a fourth shot into the wall before exiting.

Amethyst came running down the beach as fast as she could, so fast that Peridot with her shopping bags filled with art supplies and snacks couldn't keep up.

She arrived just in time to see Topaz helping Aquamarine into their car.

"Hey!" Amethyst cried out, drawing her pistol. Topaz didn't react, ducking into the driver's seat and starting the car.

"Perry, stand back," she warned, aiming her gun. Peridot squealed and put her hands over her ears.

Amethyst fired a full clip of ammo at the car. She saw a few shots smash harmlessly into the car's body, but it did nothing to prevent it from driving off, the occupants unscathed.

"Motherfucker!" Amethyst spat as she clicked the trigger on an empty chamber, watching the car recede into the distance.

"Oh my God, oh my God," Peridot freaked out, yelling. "Lapis! Pearl! Garnet! Greg!"

"Perry, wait!" Amethyst called as Peridot ran past her towards the beach house.

"Lapis, please be okay!" Peridot screamed. She stopped for a second as she spotted the shattered window, a few specks of blood in the sand. But kept moving.

Amethyst couldn't do anything more than follow, numbly feeding another clip into her magazine.

She was terrified at what they'd find inside the beach house. Horrified that her friends might be hurt, or even dead.

And disgusted and angry and upset that, if they were, she could do nothing to change it.
Because she hadn't been there.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone especially curious, I've gone back and added end notes to previous chapters explaining some of the cultural and political contexts for the story, along with recommended readings. Not sure how many readers that would appeal to, but it's there for anyone who wishes to learn more.
The Confession

October 4, 1975

Amethyst paced back and forth across the living room, with her pistol back in her belt and her whip in hand, spoiling for a fight. Peridot wasn't much calmer. The rest of the team, in varying states of exhaustion and pain, slumped into chairs and couches as the Gems tried to plan their next move.

"What happened to Lapis?" Peridot asked, still frantic and upset, pulling on her hair. "Did they hurt her? Did they kill her? Where is she!?"

She had spent nearly half an hour searching every square inch of the house for a sign of Lapis. And outside. She found the footprints in the sand, the blood and signs of a struggle. Which made her terrified imagining what had happened.

But no Lapis.

Which made her even more scared. And upset.

Because she hadn't been there.

"They took her," Garnet said weakly, struggling to sit up in her chair.

"What do you mean?" Peridot asked, waving her arms frantically. "Who took her? Why? Where?"

"The same people we were dealing with before," Amethyst said, her voice a savage, impatient growl. "You know, the guys who shot you in the hand."

"Only one of them was the same," Garnet corrected. "There were three total. One was Jasper. One was your friend from the beach earlier."

And Amethyst felt another stab of guilt. Unconsciously, she lashed her whip against the floor, making Peridot yelp and back away.

"And...who else?" Peridot demanded.

"Aquamarine."

Amethyst.

"Oh, shit," Amethyst said, sitting down on the couch as if completely overwhelmed.

"Who's Aquamarine?" Greg asked. "She was a real tough cookie if she could take two shotgun blasts at close range."

"Those weren't live rounds," Garnet muttered.

"...Really?" Greg demanded in disbelief. "Maybe you could have told me that?"

"I wasn't planning on loaning you my shotgun," Garnet said.

"Aquamarine is the most awful bitch who ever lived," Amethyst interrupted. She sighed, putting her hands in her head. "Ugh. I should have known she'd be involved in this."
"Aquamarine works for the CIA," Garnet explained, more helpfully. "Officially. Unofficially, she's a private security contractor who does all kinds of dirty work for the government, or really...for anyone who can pay her money. She used to hunt Nazi war criminals for a living. Now she seems to target anyone with a pulse."

"And she is a tough little package," Amethyst said. "Like a kid but crueler, meaner, stronger."

"And craftier," Garnet said, rubbing her leg, still sore from being shocked.

Greg nodded, remembering their encounter.

"How did we not see this before now?" Pearl muttered weakly, her voice barely above a breath. "We've dealt with that woman in the past. We should have known her stubby little fingerprints were all over this...operation."

"Nobody can see everything," Garnet said, before adding wryly, "not even Sapphire."

She remembered the tarot card crumpled up in her pocket. Knew she might have been able to prevent this. And sunk down into the couch, unnoticed by the others.

"We have to go after them," Amethyst insisted.

"No," Pearl croaked.

"No!? How can you say that?" Peridot practically exploded. "Every minute we sit here arguing, they get farther away and Lapis..." And she couldn't finish the thought, sinking back with a whimper. Amethyst put a hand on her shoulder as Peridot tried to avoid breaking down further.

"First of all, we don't know where to start," Garnet explained patiently. "We have no idea where they could be going. There's not going to be any rush until and unless we hear from them."

"And they don't seem like they're into taking hostages," Amethyst grumbled, reluctantly accepting Garnet's logic. "We don't have anything that they want."

"Well," Greg said, "we have Pearl."

And the room went deathly quiet. Pearl looked down at the floor, awkwardly averting the gaze of everyone in the room.

"If they found us once, they could find us again," Amethyst said quietly. "Pearl isn't something they'd want to negotiate for..."

Pearl quietly resented being talked about as if she wasn't there - as if she was an object, not a person - but didn't have the energy to argue.

But she remembered what Topaz had said to her, and tried to make sense about it. Something about jewels? What could that mean?

"They could have killed me," she interjected, more strongly than before. "But they didn't. Or she didn't."

"She?" Amethyst asked.

"Who do you mean?" Peridot demanded.

"That woman with them," Pearl said, not knowing Topaz's name and struggling to explain what had
happened. "The one who...wasn't Jasper. She could have killed me...but she didn't. She pretended to kill me...and she told me..."

She closed her eyes, trying to remember the words more clearly than they came out when her ears were ringing.

"She told me...something about not to track them down," Pearl said. "Just to...she said something about jewels."

"Jewels?" Amethyst blinked, not understanding.

"What jewels, Pearl?" Garnet asked quietly.

"She didn't say," Pearl replied in frustration.

"Oh, great," Amethyst groaned. "More Sapphire shit. People need to stop talking in fucking epigrams so people can understand what you actually mean!"

She stood up and lashed her whip against the couch, then cried in rage and upset.

"Wait a minute," Peridot interjected. "Back at the hotel...Jasper mentioned something about Lapis knowing about the Jewels. And that's why they wanted to take her..."

"Again with the Jewels," Amethyst said. "That doesn't tell us anything."

But Peridot's mind was spinning into action. She started piecing things together in her mind, pacing and ranting as she usually did when she got excited or tried to patch thoughts into something coherent.

"Jewels...Jewels...Jewels...If she wanted us to know what that meant, wouldn't she have told us more directly? Ah! But maybe she expected that she knew what the Jewels were? Jewels...Jewels...Crystal Gems! Ah ha! No, that wouldn't make any sense...Something she'd expect us to know..."

Amethyst, Garnet and Pearl watched their new friend work with something like disbelief. Garnet seemed impressed, allowing a smile to slip over her face.

"Jewels...Jewels...Family Jewels!"

The realization hit her like a ton of bricks. A phrase she'd encountered in her research for Senator Dewey and the Committee, but could never confirm thanks to uncooperative witnesses.

"Lapis knows about the Family Jewels!" She shouted with all the excitement of a world-shattering revelation.

"What's that?" Amethyst asked.

"The secret CIA documents," Peridot continued. "Where the director asked his employees to put together all actions taken outside the CIA's charter."

"Must be an encyclopedia," Amethyst said.

"Well, it was supposedly 700 pages," Peridot affirmed. "But we never got to see it, could never confirm it existed beyond what got into the press. Whatever's in there was being hidden from the public. And..."

Then she said, almost in a whisper, as the meaning sunk in: "Lapis knew about them."
"Whoa," Amethyst said sympathetically. "Sounds like Lappy kept an awful lot from you, Perry."

"From all of us," Pearl insisted. "Well, at least now that makes some sense."

"Still, why did they take Lapis alive?" Peridot wondered. "Why not just kill her?"

"Maybe because she knows where they're hidden?" Greg suggested. The others looked at him in bafflement.

"I mean, it makes sense," he explained, somewhat sheepishly. "Lapis knew about these Jewels, so she got a copy. Hid them somewhere. And they want to find it. That's why they took her."


"Well, that's great and all, but it doesn't really help us that much," Amethyst butted in. "Because we'd still have to know where they're going to do anything about it."

And a heavy, resigned sadness, of worry and uncertainty, overtook the room.

"Now what are we going to do?" Greg asked. "I mean, I don't know why they didn't just kill Pearl, unless this other lady..." He rubbed the back of his neck where he'd been struck earlier. "Unless she's, like, working for someone else. But they can always come back."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Garnet added quietly.

"I'm not afraid," Amethyst insisted, brandishing her whip. "I'm ready to kick some ass!"

"That's your answer to everything," Garnet groaned.

"I'm scrappy, waddya want?" Amethyst asked, shrugging.

"Maybe a little thought and care put into how you're going to kick their ass," Pearl said.

Amethyst smiled reluctantly, glad to see Pearl regaining a little bit of her haughtiness. Much better than the crying, bloodied mess she'd found upstairs and caressed for minutes on end.

"True, that couldn't hurt," Amethyst said grudgingly as she sat beside Pearl.

"And even if we do figure it out," Peridot added, "we're still gonna have to find the Jewels before they do. Before they do...before they hurt Lapis."

She could barely choke out the rest of the sentence. She sat down between Amethyst and Pearl, who did their best to comfort her.

But it didn't. Only answers...only the knowledge that Lapis would be safe, could do that.

Amethyst remained stubbornly on vigil, even though Garnet and Greg seemed mostly recovered after the first few hours. She had a grim seriousness, a prickly agitation that made the others afraid to dissuade her from pacing around the beach house, waiting for Aquamarine and her crew to show up so that she could beat holy hell out of them. To make up for not being there.

Garnet decided to take advantage of the situation. She helped Pearl back into bed, then laid down herself, contemplating everything that had happened. She had too many thoughts to sleep, too many fears to relax. But it was something.
Greg went back outside to his van, noodling aimlessly away on his guitar. Trying to process what happened.

And Peridot went up to her room to be alone, to mourn, to worry, to try and find something that made sense of what happened.

It happened almost by chance. She thought she'd looked everywhere in the room for a sign of where Lapis might have gone, but for some reason hadn't thought to look on the desk. She saw a book with a piece of paper folded into it. She opened it up. And gasped at what she saw.

A letter. Written by Lapis. Words were crossed out, the page blotted with ink, but most of it was still legible.

Her eyes scanned the page, the words spilling over her with all their dread meaning. Though more than anything, the opening line caught her attention:

*Perry,*

_I don't know whether or not I love you. It's too early to tell. But I love being with you, and I think you're an amazing person. Which makes me feel awful for not being more truthful to you about my past. I've told you a little bit about my time as an informant for CHAOS, and I don't feel like rehashing the details would help just now. But there is something you do need to know about me. I include it here, at the risk that it might hurt you and make you realize what a monster I am._

There's nothing you could say that would make me stop loving you, Peridot thought, reassuring herself. Though she trembled, and felt apprehension in the pit of her stomach as she read on. She was surprised by the mixture of articulateness, anguish and self-loathing in Lapis's words.

_By 1973, the CIA was pretty much done with me - and I was done with them. The New Left and the antiwar movement were pretty much dead - no one cared, except the Weathermen and other kooks who were blowing buildings up, as if that solved anything. As if it could make a difference. And I didn't have connections enough with those groups to make any headway._

_I don't want you to think that I was some babe in the woods this whole time. Maybe at first. I certainly didn't get into this business voluntarily. But I took pleasure in it. I took satisfaction in doing my job, in hurting people and destroying lives. In one sense, I had to - it was the only way I could stay sane. In another...well, if I didn't feel bad about it, I wouldn't have hidden it from you. I wouldn't be writing this._

_But it happened, regardless of how I felt. What happened is what matters._

_I wish I had a moment of clarity, a revelation where I suddenly realized. That would be good for the movie about my life. I can't remember what specifically changed my mind. Maybe I'd written one too many letters, doodled one too many derogatory cartoons, whispered one too many rumors. Destroyed one too many people. Maybe it just got to me, after all. Even Lapis Lazuli has a limit, I guess. Or maybe it's just because there was nothing to do anymore and I was bored and wanted to shake things up. That sounds like me._

_But at some point, I decided I wasn't interesting in doing it any more. Not only that, I was going to make a statement that they couldn't ignore, that showed what they weren't going to have Lapis Lazuli to kick around any more._

_Somehow I found out about the Family Jewels. It surprised me, even knowing what little I did about the CIA's operating structure, that they'd be dumb enough to write down all their bad stuff - all their_
crimes, let's not use euphemisms - and put it into one place for convenient reference. What baffled me was when one of my handlers mentioned that there were multiple copies of this document floating around. And one of them ended up in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Maybe just learning that the papers were in my neck of the woods were enough to make me act.

I'd like to pretend I did it out of principle. But like I said, I don't know. Though I doubt it very much. When have I ever done that?

I'll spare you all the gory details, but what I did was enough. I seduced an agent who was in the area to collect the file. (You'll probably recognize this woman as Jasper, one of our friends from the hotel. I have no clue if that's her real name or not.) I got from her the information on where the file was. I showed up with a gun and a bomb and took the files and burned the office to the ground. And two of the employees there died.

Two people dead. Because of me. That's why I didn't tell you. Both people who probably had nothing to do with anything, just low-level bureaucrats handling papers and recruiting employees and doing what bureaucrats do.

Maybe I could rationalize it in some way when I was just hurting radicals or ruining lives. It's not my fault how they react to a poison pen letter - that's on them. I can only encourage them, not make them do something. But these people died directly because of me. I'm inclined to think their deaths were horrible, since I didn't shoot either of them - they probably roasted alive, or died of smoke inhalation, or were crushed when the building collapsed around them...

Whatever happened, I took the Jewels. I debated what to do with them. Would have leaked them to the press or something, except I didn't get a chance, because there were cops and FBI after me. So I hid them in an abandoned farmhouse outside Toledo, somewhere no one would think to look. I wish I could remember the address...Maybe I'll think of some way to lead you there later. As far as I know, they're still there. They must be, if someone wants me dead for it.

Hopefully I'll get the courage to tell you all this myself and you'll never read this letter. If I'm lucky, I'll still count you as a friend, maybe even as something more, and we can spend the rest of our lives shopping and watching Guiding Light and holding hands and kissing and making love and painting sunsets on the beach together until we're old and gray and nothing in the world matters but us.

But I doubt it. I mean, when have I ever been lucky?

Love,

Lapis Lazuli

Peridot felt the hot tears streaming down her cheeks as she finished the letter. She crumpled it up in her hands and wept loudly and openly, smashing her hand on the desk.

Not at the contents of the letter, which were shocking enough. She couldn't imagine the Lapis she knew and loved hurting anyone. (She hadn't actually seen Lapis shoot Jasper and one of her goons at the hotel, only her evident self-sacrifice.) She couldn't have imagined it was deliberate. And with that thought, she began building elaborate excuses for Lapis's actions in her mind, as if finding a reason for her killing people made it okay.

But no, she told herself. Lapis wouldn't make excuses. Lapis wouldn't want them. She did what she did and she felt awful about it. And maybe she should.

Peridot felt the last thought shocking; it made her hurt just thinking about it. But she realized it was
true. If Lapis didn't feel bad about being involved, however accidentally, in someone's death, she wasn't human. And it made Peridot wonder just what kind of woman she really was.

*Maybe she was horrible.*

*No, she wasn't. She wasn't horrible, at least by nature. She was hurt. She'd been trapped.*

*But she did bad things. Evil things, even. Hurt people. Ruined lives. Like she said.*

*And on some level, she enjoyed it.*

*But how could she be a bad person? The girl I'd spent several days with? The girl who was so quiet and fun and liked nothing more than holding my hand? Who liked to paint and watch bad movies and who seemed to want nothing more in the world than a friend. To be happy.*

*Even monsters want to be happy.*

*But Lapis isn't a monster. She's...Lapis.*

And Peridot wrestled with these dueling thoughts for awhile. Until she dried her tears, cleared her scattered thoughts and screwed up the courage to ask herself the only question that mattered.

*Do I still love Lapis Lazuli?*

The answer came, quickly and simply: *Yes.*

And now, Peridot had to find her.
October 6, 1975

Pearl woke up before dawn that Monday. Before Garnet or Amethyst would be awake to stop her.

Her stomach was still sore and stiff, the fresh injury from Aquamarine's knife barely scabbed over. She realized that her range of motion was still limited, and would certainly inhibit her in a fight.

But damn it, it was too important to wait. It wouldn't be long before they'd face Aquamarine and her team again. And who knows what would happen then? She needed to be ready, or as ready as she could be.

As the sun rose on the horizon, bringing with it crisp, autumn air, she unsheathed her sword. Regarding the message inlaid on the hilt in the dim light.

Fidelity. Bravery. Integrity.

She reflected on it. Remembered Rose giving her the sword as a birthday present one year, when she still believed a little bit in the FBI and its mission. Never imagining, despite all her fencing experience, that she'd actually use it.

She took a fighting stance on the beach, facing her blade towards the horizon. And practiced her thrusts and parries and footwork.

Her stance was wide, her limbs still moved quickly and flexibly. She imagined herself fighting Aquamarine and Jasper and...she tried not to think of the other woman as a villain, even if she did rough up Garnet and Greg, because she'd been helpful. So she just imagined regular, generic suits coming at her.

She parried their thrusts, disarmed them with a swing of her blade, slashed or impaled them with a thrust. She still found it hard to bend, or to stab and thrust at certain angles, with her sore muscles and skin. But she merely compensated by taking alternate angles. It would be a risk, something that a quick-thinking, more flexible opponent could exploit in the heat of battle. But she had to take a chance; she didn't have much choice.

Of course, she reasoned, anyone could pull a gun and shoot me at any time. And then all of this would be pointless.

She imagined a hulking brute coming at her, blocking a few of her thrusts, then stepping back and drawing a pistol.

With a cry, she leaped in the air and stabbed her sword into the sand.

She felt a small smudge of blood spilling onto the clothes around her belly. Her fresh wound had
reopened. But it didn't seem to hurt. And it didn't seriously inhibit her movement. Put a fresh bandage on it, maybe some makeshift stitches and it would be okay.

Still, it would be hard to hide this much blood.

As Pearl examined herself, she turned and saw Amethyst watching her from the sand dune, her whip beside her.

"Amethyst! I, um, didn't expect anyone to be out here this early," Pearl said, blushing. She looked down at the red stain spreading on her clothes and realized hiding it was futile.

"Pearl, are you okay?" Amethyst asked, eyeballing the stain.

"Umm, I think so," Pearl said, blushing. "It's just that knife cut from the other day, not any of the surgical incisions."


"Well, it's not like I have much choice," Pearl said, pulling her sword from the sand. "Aquamarine and her goons won't let us rest long enough for everything to heal right."

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking," Amethyst said. Pearl couldn't help noticing how downcast she seemed, and came and sat next to her.

"Amethyst, what's wrong?"

Amethyst reached out and clutched the handle of her whip. She seemed deep in thought, unable to form her thoughts into words.

"You know, I always used to pride myself on being the first one to fight," she said finally. "Like, I'm younger than you or Garnet, and I felt like I needed to prove myself. That's why, if I seem a little reckless or violent or whatever, it's just...I wanna measure up, you know? I wanna be as good as both of you."

"Amethyst, you are," Pearl assured her. But Amethyst didn't seem reassured.

"I should have been there," she growled. "And none of this would have happened."

Amethyst suddenly stood up and lashed her whip against a rock she spotted a few feet away, knocking it onto her side.

"Amethyst, it isn't your fault," Pearl said. "Nothing that's happened is your fault. Please don't feel that way..."

"What if I'd been there, though?" she said. "You and Garnet and Greg wouldn't have gotten roughed up. Lapis would still be here, and not...Man, I don't even wanna think about what they're doing for her. And Peridot...She's really shook up by this whole thing."

"In fairness, she seems easily shaken up," Pearl said, trying to smile.

"Why wouldn't she be? She's a pencil-pusher who just wanted to ask you a few questions. And she got drawn into a complete shit show that's gonna ruin her life and might even end it. And that's not even to mention Lapis..."

She stopped herself, not sure if she was breaking confidence to tell Pearl.
"She spent half the night crying," Amethyst said quietly.

"I heard her," Pearl affirmed.

"And reading that letter, over and over. I ask to see it, and she wouldn't let me."

Pearl nodded.

"She must really love her," Amethyst said, touched by the thought.

"I had a hunch," Pearl said, looking down in the sand. She noticed that she'd been absentmindedly tracing shapes in the sand with her right leg.

"Yeah. We should be so lucky, huh?"

Pearl just made an absentminded "hmm" as she regarded the sword again, turning it over in her hands. Her eyes always returning to the sword in the hilt, framed by her reflection.

"You know, you had Rose," Amethyst said. "I haven't really ever had anyone. Don't think words could do justice to how jealous I am of you and Perry and...heck, even Greg."

"Even Greg?" Pearl asked, a bit surprised by the way she phrased it.

"Heck, Garnet had a boyfriend until she moved out her with us," Amethyst continued. "All I have is...You know, guys and gals who want to do it for one night and then...you know, treat me like a slut, like it's my fault that people sleep with me. Because I'm a woman. Because I'm just a chicana and we're all hot-blooded and Latin lovers and all that bullshit. And it gets under my skin, you know? People treating me like I'm trash because I like sex. Well, so fucking what? I like sex. But I want love too."

She closed her eyes, seemingly on the verge of tears. "But they don't. And that's the problem. Though, I mean, who could blame them?"

Pearl felt a little surprised that Amethyst was opening up about this. She'd certainly never thought about Amethyst in that way.

"And then I see you and Rose, and now Perry and Lapis, and...You know, I just wish someone would care about me that way."

"Oh, Amethyst," Pearl cooed. She reached out to comfort her friend, but Amethyst moved away instead, facing away from her.

"I dunno, maybe that's why...Like, I consider you guys my family. Isn't that fucked up?"

"It's not...messed up at all," Pearl assured her.

"All the love and attention I might give to an actual boyfriend, or girlfriend, or...you know, whatever. I'm bisexual, and that's another thing which makes it worse..."

"You know I would never judge you about that..."

"No, you wouldn't. But people don't understand that I'm not just fickle or can't make up my mind or whatever. And that includes, you know, anyone I might..."

Amethyst sighed again. Pearl felt her heart breaking for her friend.
"Anyway...I love you guys. And any time something happens to you...it feels like it's my fault. Like I should have done something. Especially when...I wasn't there."

Pearl edged closer and rested a hand on Amethyst's shoulder.

"You know," she said, "when I first met you I had no idea what to make of you. You seemed like a hot-blooded girl with a big mouth and I thought, wow, Rose sure knows how to pick her friends."

"Gee, thanks," Amethyst grumbled.

"But then I got to know you, and I saw...Yes, you are many things I don't always like. You're crude and disorganized and you swear way more than I do. But for all that, you're very strong and very loving and...you're a good person, Amethyst. Not many people can say that these days."

Silence, but for the gentle lapping of the waves.

"You can't judge a book by its cover," Pearl continued. "That's a lesson I have tried so to learn over the years. And sometimes I wonder if it sticks. And then I realize...you're my friend."

Amethyst sniffled and put her hand on Pearl's. But still wouldn't face her.

"You have nothing to be ashamed about. Nothing to feel guilty for. You're an incredible young woman and you're much braver and tougher than I am, or will ever be. And you want to do the right thing, and make the world a better place, even if it's a totally messed-up way of doing it..."

Amethyst chuckled at that.

"But you know, Rose loved you," Pearl assured her. "She loved everyone. That's on her, not me. She thought maybe some decent people could come together and make a difference in a world filled with hate, a world that doesn't care. And, I dunno..."

Now it was Pearl's term to become all moody and reflective. Amethyst looked and saw Pearl's eyes brimming with tears as she looked out towards the rising sun.

"A lot of times I wonder how good of a person I am. Why I didn't do the right thing sooner. Whether it was the right thing after all, or if I'm doing the right thing now. But then...I realize...one person thought I was. One person who saw the good in you, and the good in Garnet, and...yes. The good in Greg. Maybe sometimes I think she made a huge mistake, or that I was some kind of experiment. But then I think...no. If she loved me, I have to be a good person. And sometimes...that's enough to keep me going."

"P, I'll tell you something," Amethyst said quietly, sitting down next to her. "You're like the most nagging, annoying Anglo mom ever. And you're the tough, smart, funny, cool big sister I never had. You're an inspiration, even if you don't appreciate it. You gave up a nice, comfortable life doing what you loved to do the right thing. I mean, that's pretty awesome."

Pearl wanted to interject and say that she didn't love working as a typist, nor the specifics of her job. But she let Amethyst have her moment.

"Anyway. You and Rose and Garnet are the best things that ever happened to me. It's like, I feel like I'm worth something when I'm with you guys. And if anything ever happened to you..."

The two clenched hands and held them for a long moment. Not looking at each other, just being there.
"I know," Pearl said quietly.

The two sat there silently, watching the waves lapping against the shore.

"Now, I realize it's hard," Pearl said quietly, before standing and launching into her Mom Mode. "But moping isn't going to solve anything! Both of us need to snap out of this self-pity and get ready to find Lapis, find the Family Jewels and save the day!"

"Attagirl, Pearl," Amethyst said, laughing as she reached forward and gave Pearl a noogie. Then she looked down at the bloodstain on Pearl's outfit.

"Seriously though, Pearl, check yourself. That wound looks nasty!"

Pearl laughed. "It will take more than a little cut to take down Pearl White!" she said with as much suaveness as she could muster. She did a quick little spin move with her sword, then sheathed it.

"Still, it won't do to go around with blood on my shirt," Pearl admitted as they headed back towards the house.

As they approached the house, chatting and laughing with each other, Garnet watched them through a window. She wasn't upset about Pearl refusing to rest any more, nor was she concerned about the blood on her outfit. She was happy.

Happy that the team seemed to be back. Because it was time for the Crystal Gems to get their act together.

"The car is still pretty busted up," Greg said. "I took a look this morning, and...yeah, I don't think it's really up for a cross country trek."

"Bummer," Amethyst said.

"Maybe we can pool together enough money for a rental?" Pearl suggested.

"Or steal one!" Amethyst chuckled, earning looks of reproach from her partners.

"What? I'm just thinking outside the box, here!"

"Well, you could always use the van," Greg suggested.

"Greg, we wouldn't want to put you in harm's way..." Garnet began.

"Hey, I've already been in harm's way," Greg interrupted. "Too late for me to back out now. Besides, I wanna settle a score with those guys, too. Your fight is my fight."

"Greg, that's very..." Pearl seemed genuinely surprised by the offer. "Thank you!"

She smiled at him again. And again, Greg felt happy just by the implication of healing.

"All right, Greg!" Amethyst cheered, punching him in the shoulder and snapping him out of his little reverie. Garnet shot him a thumb's up.

"I just hope there's enough room in that tiny van," Peridot grumbled. The first time she'd talked in awhile.

"I think we have more pressing matters than that," Garnet said. "Like, where are they taking Lapis?"
"I don't know if that's so important as where the Jewels are," Pearl said.

"What do you mean!" Peridot yelled. "Of course it's important! As we speak, they're doing unspeakable things to Lapis in hopes that she'll talk and..."

"Peridot, calm down!" Garnet insisted.

"...What if she doesn't talk. That would be even scarier."

"She's alive as long as she keeps her mouth shut," Garnet insisted, though she instantly regretted the choice of words when she saw Peridot's resentful glare.

"Sorry. She's alive until she tells them what they want, and takes them there. I think that's her gambit, whether or not she's planning for us. I think we need to find where these Jewels are being kept and wait for Aquamarine and Lapis and the rest to arrive. That's our best chance. If we go looking for Lapis, it won't help because we don't have even have a general idea where she'll be, or how long she'll be there. Even our sources might not know all the black sites or the places they'd hide an important prisoner. So I'm thinking this farmhouse is our best bet."

"We don't have any guarantee that they'll take her there alive," Pearl said fretfully.

Garnet considered this for a moment. "What other choice do we have?"

No one had an answer. Not even Peridot, who fidgeted and made nervous grumbles and wringed her hands together.

"You said it was Toledo, right? I have a few contacts in that area," Greg said. "I mean, I'm not a super-secret agent like you guys, but I've been on tour enough that I have a pretty wide net of acquaintances."

"That's good," Garnet affirmed. "And they might be less suspicious of you asking questions than one of us."

"True," Greg admitted. "Who would expect a washed-up rock star would be up to his neck in intrigue?"

"At least that kinda intrigue," Amethyst joked.

"Maybe it's best if we split up for now," Pearl said.

"Whoa, I dunno..." Amethyst began.

"Hear me out," Pearl continued. "We've got a lot of ground to cover and only the faintest idea of where to start."

The group thought about this. Then Garnet interjected:

"I don't think any of us ought to go anywhere alone. Especially Peridot."

"Why especially Peridot?" Peridot demanded.

"Because you aren't armed and you're not a fighter," Garnet said bluntly. Peridot harrumphed and crossed her arms.

"I mean, I'm not much of a fighter either," Greg admitted.
"Let's do this," Garnet suggested. "You three: Greg, Peridot and Pearl, go ahead to Toledo and start investigating things. Me and Amethyst will make a stop in DC and see if our sources know anything. That way we can cover all the bases."

"Maybe I can come to DC instead," Peridot suggested.

"What?" Pearl sputtered. She traded a nervous glance with Greg, the two's eyes meeting then sheepishly darting apart.

"Oh god," Amethyst muttered.

"I mean, think about it," Peridot suggested. "I still nominally work for a Senator, and can probably make a few calls, ask some questions..."

"Not a bad idea," Garnet admitted. "Except that you're being watched. You'd have to be extra discreet."

"I have my ways," Peridot assured her mysteriously. She shot Garnet a thumbs-up; Garnet returned it with a grimace on her face.

"Pearl, do you think you and Greg can take a car ride to Ohio without killing each other?" Amethyst asked.

The $64,000 question. Neither of them knew.

"Umm...sure," Pearl said.

"I mean, we have bigger fish to fry, so...why not?" Greg said, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

"Then it's settled," Garnet said. "We'll wait another day or two to make sure everyone's completely back on their feet..." She shot Pearl an anxious glance as she said these words; Pearl blushed and looked away. "Then we'll split up. And meet in Toledo within the next week or so. We'll stay in touch the best we can in the meantime."

"We need somewhere safe to reach everyone," Pearl said. "Greg and I will check into a hotel somewhere in Toledo. Oh, I wish I still had my travel guide..."

"Check around in the back of my van," Greg suggested. "There's all kinda junk back there."

"Wait a minute!" Peridot interjected. "I just thought of something. I have a room at the Georgetown Hilton that I use when the Senator has guests in DC. How about me, Garnet and Amethyst stay there while we're in DC. I mean, I'm pretty sure they're watching your place, too..."

"She has a point, G," Amethyst said.

"Not a bad idea," Garnet said. "Plus I could use some room service cheeseburgers."

"Plus a swanky hotel would be a nice change from this ratty old beach house," Amethyst commented. "Man, I feel like I'm getting cabin fever."

"All right then, it's settled," Garnet said. "Everybody get some rest and start packing. This is our last day in Beach City."

"Oh geez, I'm so excited!" Peridot said. "My first mission as a Crystal Gem! What should I pack? Do I get to wear a star?"
"Hey, at least you're not depressed any more!" Amethyst said, slapping her back.

"Oh, I am depressed!" Peridot said through an excited grin. "And terrified! But at least I'll be able to do something instead of sitting around worrying!"

"Attagirl," Amethyst said.

The two went upstairs chattering excitedly. Garnet walked over to Pearl.

"Pearl, will you be all right alone with Greg?" she whispered.

"I think so," Pearl said. Though her face betrayed uncertainty.

"I don't wanna put you two in any uncomfortable situations," Garnet assured her. "If you want to go to DC instead of me..."

"No, Sapphire and Bismuth are your friends, not mine," Pearl said. "Besides...maybe it'll be a good way to bury the hatchet."

Garnet nodded and started upstairs.

"And Pearl? Nice moves this morning."

The two exchanged smiles. Then Pearl looked over at Greg, who was sitting sheepishly on the couch, unsure what to do or say.

"So...ever been to Ohio?"
October 8, 1975

Washington, DC

Richard Helms did not appreciate being forced to stay in Washington. He had important business to transact elsewhere; oil tycoons, lobbyists, sheikhs, emissaries of the Shah all awaited him in New York and Riyadh and Tehran.

And here he was, wasting his time again before a Senate committee who neither appreciated nor cared about the sacrifices he'd made for his country.

Typical. If this was the new Washington, he wanted no part of it.

He remembered that, just a few years ago, Congress was willing to give honorable men like himself the benefit of the doubt. They wouldn't press about covert missions or the day-to-day operations of the CIA, because they recognized it was often better that they, and the public, didn't know. Some things shouldn't be exposed to the people, lest they lose faith and compromise the government's ability to act. Even callow pissants like Kennedy and crooked megalomaniacs like Nixon understood that.

Not that he especially missed the old days of chasing fascists and Nazis, like some of his colleagues. The fight against Communism offered Helms the same moral clarity, without the shades of gray that bothered many. You want proof that Evil still exists in the world? Look to Stalin's gulags! Look to the millions starving Chinese and thousands of dead Cubans and the massacres unfolding, even as speak, in Indochina, a war started by liberals then forsaken by them when it became inconvenient! And now that cowardice and lack of will was rotting his own country from the inside.

And here he was, yet again, answering questions to some sniveling twenty-something staffers in wrinkled suits. At least appearing before the actual committee would allow him the dignity of facing men he respected. People his own age, if nothing else. Not these pubescent punks who read Advise and Consent and thought it would be cool to play politics with their daddy's clothes.

"Mr. Helms," a nebbish named Bayard asked, "are you aware of the CIA's history of opening the mail of foreign diplomats?"

The CIA's history...what do you know about that? Helms thought scornfully. He didn't make much effort to hide his scorn, either, fixing the young staffer with an impatient, scolding glare.

"I'm aware that that has happened, yes."

"For instance?"
"We monitor the mail of diplomats from hostile countries for useful intelligence."

"What does the CIA consider a hostile country?"

"One whose policies run counter to the interests of the United States."

"How do you define those interests, Mr. Helms?"

"I'm sorry, I thought this was a congressional hearing, not a college dialectical society."

"Not at all, I just think it would be helpful to define the terms in which you're framing these matters."

Helm's scorn turned to boiling anger. "Used to be people wouldn't even ask stupid questions like that."

"Maybe people used to be a lot more trusting of a government that didn't profligately lie and deceive them about everything."

And so on. There was no chance of a useful dialogue with someone who talked like that. So Helm's offered the bare minimum of cooperation, accompanied with a constant scowl and peremptory tone.

"I really hope you bright young geniuses realize what you're doing to this country," Helm's muttered as their session came to a close.

"We're making it better," Stan Bayard said. "Whether you like it or not."

Helm's didn't bother to respond to that stupidity, not did he accept an offered handshake. Instead, he abruptly stormed out of the hearing room.

Helm's had nearly escaped the Capitol, bustling though it was with staffers and reporters and curious spectators, when he was accosted by another eager young face.

"Mr. Ambassador!" she cried, a short, olive-skinned blonde in a blue-gray blazer. "Peridot Khoury. I'm an aide to Senator Dewey..."

"I already spoke with one of your colleagues," Helm's snapped impatiently. "I don't imagine your company would be any more edifying."

"But Mr. Helm's, I have some information that might interest you! Senator Dewey is looking for a way to conclude the hearings."

Helm's arced an eyebrow at this. "How old are you?"

"I don't see why that's any of your concern," Peridot responded. "Or how it's relevant to the speedy and quiet resolution of the Committee."

Helm's stopped and considered this for a moment, skeptical that a Senator would approach him like this through such a young aide, yet intrigued that he might. All of his espionage training told him that he was walking into a trap. Ordinarily he would have ignored Peridot and pulled out.

But he was tired, and irritated, and desperate enough to return to Iran's beautiful oilfields to listen.

"I'm listening," he said. And he cringed slightly as Peridot perked up and made an indefinable squealing noise.
He instantly regretted deciding to speak with her. Not as much, however, as he'd regret it a few minutes later.

Helms thought he was a master poker player. There was no way a fish like Peridot could menace a shark like him.

"Mr. Ambassador, I'm speaking to you off the record and of my own accord," Peridot said as they settled into a small anteroom. "Nobody needs to know about this conversation but us."

Helms looked confused, then angry as he registered those words.

"So, wait a minute. Excuse me," he sputtered with all the hauteur he could muster. "So, you aren't speaking on Senator Dewey's behalf."

"Erm, not exactly."

"You're just some punk kid lying to me, then, and wasting my time."

"Admittedly, I am a terrible liar. But good enough, it appears, that you'd fall for it."

Helms started to stand up. "I'm a busy man and I don't have time for games..."

"Sit down, Dick!" a harsh voice came from behind him. He turned to see Amethyst standing over him, dressed in a leather jacket startlingly out of place.

"You've got more than enough time for us!" she told him, putting a hand on his shoulder and pressing him back into the seat. "The Shah's oil isn't going anywhere, and neither are you."

The Ambassador was surprised, though unflustered. He defaulted to scorn, exchanging looks between the leering Amethyst and glowering, nervous-looking Peridot shuffling papers in front of her.

"I'm too much of a gentleman to tell you ladies what I think about this," he growled.

"Lucky us," Peridot murmured. "Now let's get down to business. What do you know about Project DIAMOND?"

"Is this a joke?" Helms asked. "I don't have to answer any questions..."

"No, strictly speaking I can't compel you to answer questions like this," Peridot said, pressing her glasses against her nose. "But! I'd say it's in your best interest to do so."

Helms looked behind him at Amethyst, folding her arms and grinning menacingly. Then back at Peridot.

"Now, Project DIAMOND," Peridot began.

"Project DIAMOND is something that needn't concern you or the Committee in any way," Helms said.

"Wrong answer!" Amethyst said, moving forward and grabbing Helms' hand. She pulled it down and pinned it to the table, easily restraining the struggling Ambassador.

"I didn't say anything about the Committee wanting this information," Peridot said. "Remember, this conversation is between us."
"You're crazy if you think you can do this to an Ambassador in the Capitol Building!" Helms barked.

"I've been called worse," Peridot said evenly. She projected an air of calm, but beneath the table her legs were trembling with fear.

"Dick, I take it you're a big picture guy," Amethyst said into his ear. "Maybe you have a little trouble with the fine print. Fine, lemme spell it out for you. We're friends of Pearl White."

"Pearl White?" Helms feigned ignorance.

"And Lapis Lazuli," Amethyst added.

Upon hearing that name, Helms' face blanched. Peridot couldn't help smiling at his reaction, though nervousness towards Lapis weighed her stomach.

"So basically, we have a very vested interest in talking to you," Amethyst assured Helms. "Specifically, our friend Lapis vanished under less-than-peaceful circumstances the other day, and we know that our mutual friends with the Agency have hold of her. I assume you know Aquamarine."

Amethyst tensed her hand, squeezing Helms' knuckles with an imminent threat of torture. Helms gulped heavily as he pondered the question.

"Yes, I know the woman," he said quietly.

"Cool, now we're getting somewhere," Amethyst said, loosening her grip but hanging close, deliberately breathing in his nose. "Now, we're prepared to make a deal."

"What deal?" Helms said, cringing at Amethyst's aggression and unbrushed teeth. "You aren't in a position to make a deal."

"She'll tell you," Amethyst said, breaking off and stalking across the room.

"Now, Mr. Ambassador," Peridot said officiously, as if the whole threatening exchange hadn't just occurred. "We know that you and this Aquamarine - or should we say, Miss Montague..."

"Ms. Montague," Helms interrupted. "I believe she's married."

"Why Mr. Ambassador, I didn't know you were such a stickler for gender pronouns!" Peridot marveled sarcastically. Amethyst chuckled across the room.

"Anyway. Ms. Montague wants Miss Lazuli because she believes our friend possesses some damning documents produced by the Agency. Hate to be the one to tell you this, Mr. Ambassador, but that won't matter because she turned them over to us, and we possess them."

Helms goggled at this, then looked at Amethyst who grinned in response.

"Where are they?" he demanded, his voice a quiet, panther-like growl.

"Somewhere safe," Peridot assured him. "Somewhere they won't be read by, say, ten million newspaper readers and eighty million television viewers within the next week. Somewhere they can't be leaked to a foreign power or an activist group or a Congressman or Senator who might value truth over deception. Somewhere we can produce them easily in exchange for our friend."
"I suggest you produce them immediately, ma'am," Helms warned. "This is not a game."

"I know very well that it's not," Peridot said. She raised her left hand, showing Helms the fresh bullet scar on her wrist.

"We give you the Jewels if you give us Lazuli," Peridot offered flatly. "That's the deal. No haggling. No deal making. At the very least, we need proof positive that Ms. Lazuli is alive before we barter."

Helms smirked. "You do think this is a game, young lady," he said. "As if I'd lay my cards on the table without asking to see your hand. I'd need proof that you have the Jewels first."

"No, that's not how we're doing this," Peridot said, waving a reproachful finger. A condescending motion which turned Helms to fury.

"Now see here...!" he roared, until Amethyst shot him a scowl that planted him back in his seat.

"I'll give you a phone number where you can reach us," Peridot said, scrawling something down on a piece of paper. "Once you can confirm that Miss Lazuli is alive, I'll give you ten pages from the Jewels to prove our good faith. We can arrange the exchange in person or a postal box or however you want to handle it.

"Either way," Peridot said, leaning forward with her chin in her hands and an arrogant smirk, "it's better that you depart here with the beginnings of a deal than not."

Helms growled under his breath, pocketing the phone number. He really, really didn't want to play this game, felt embarrassed that he had to, but for the moment it appeared he had no choice.

"I'll see what I can do," Helms offered guardedly.

"Great!" Peridot said, springing to her feet. "We'll be in touch within the next twelve hours."

She offered the Ambassador her hand; Helms balked, staring at it with unvarnished hatred.

"Just remember," Peridot said, "I work for a Senator and I have about twenty reporters on speed dial. You do anything, you'll read the Jewels in Jack Anderson tomorrow morning."

Helms offered her another angry glower. He gave Peridot the coldest, most perfunctory handshake in the history of humanity before breaking away.

"I hope you realize what you're doing to this country," Helms said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"We're making it better," Peridot assured him. "Whether you like it or not."

Helms froze for a moment at those words, thinking he'd been set up the whole time. Then shook his head and exited the anteroom without further comment.

"Damn it, Perry, that was cold-blooded!" Amethyst enthused, walking over to her friend and slapping a high five. "Didn't think I had it in you!"

"Well, to be fair, an arrogant pile of shit like Dick Helms invites that sort of treatment," Peridot assured Amethyst.

Amethyst laughed. "Truth. You really smoked him, though. I really don't want to get on your bad side!"
"You really don't," Peridot agreed, shaking her head, then allowing a grin to slip across her face.

But only for a moment. Then Amethyst sighed.

"Do you think he bought it?" Amethyst wondered.

"I think so," Peridot said.

"I mean, we don't know where the Jewels are any more than they do," Amethyst explained. "I mean, if they find out we're bluffing them, they're gonna be pissed."

"They're already pissed," Peridot reminded her. "We're just putting them on guard and buying ourselves a little time to act. And if we can confirm that Lapis is still alive..."

And she left that sentence hanging, her triumph deflating in an instant.

"She's fine," Amethyst said. "Lapis is a tough chick. She's been through a lot worse than this."

Peridot's expression conveyed doubt. But she didn't say anything more about it. She couldn't bear to think about it.

"Well, now we wait for their phone call," Peridot said, clenching her teeth. She crossed to the other side of the desk and started stuffing her papers into a briefcase.

"And, um, wait to hear from Garnet," Amethyst offered.

Peridot nodded without looking up. "And pray," she added.

She snapped the briefcase shut.

"Of course Lazuli is still alive," Aquamarine assured Helms. "She's not stupid. She knows that she'll live until she talks, or at least until we confirm she's telling the truth."

"Is she somewhere safe?" Helms asked over the telephone.

"The odds of someone finding her, by accident or design, are nonexistent," Aquamarine vaguely assured him.

She sat in her office, still bruised and cut from her encounter with the Crystal Gems. Still with a sore, stiff back that required her to walk with a cane. But experience hadn't diminished her innate haughtiness the slightest bit.

"I hope to God you're right," Helms muttered. "This is serious business."

"We'll have to contrive a way to confirm Lazuli's status without giving ourselves a way," Aquamarine said. "Not sure a photograph or video would cut it."

"Maybe have Lazuli talk to them on the telephone."

"Dick, that's genius!" Aquamarine squeaked. "And, if done right, mind-bogglingly cruel! I wish I'd thought of it myself." She sat back and thought about it some more.

"Though we'd have to find a telephone that wasn't traceable."

"We can get around that," Helms said. He paused and sighed. "Do you really think they have the
Jewels?"

Aquamarine smirked.

"No, I don't," she said. "I think you're being bluffed, and quite badly at that. But I'm willing to play along with them for awhile. At the very least, I'm interested to see what proof they're willing to offer."

"From a purely professional standpoint?"

"I suppose."

She stood up, feeling her back wrench and struggling to suppress a cry of agony. She relished being in control of the conversation, and didn't want to convey the slightest hint of discomfort to Helms.

"You know, Dick, for years I was told that I'd be no good as an operative. Too emotional and frail and not smart enough to work as an agent. Maybe as a honeypot or someone's fuck toy, but not handling the intelligent part of intelligence. And here we are! You're getting fat and rich off a diplomatic sinecure that requires little skill, while I'm still risking my neck and making decisions that affect the well-being of the country.

"And best of all," she added, twisting the knife, "you're fucking me over through your stupidity while I see through it immediately. And naturally, you're coming to me for help. Again. Funny, that."

Helms didn't say anything, surely seething on his end. Aquamarine relished the unanswerable silence.

"I'll be in touch with you soon," she assured him sweetly. "Dick, don't give away any more secrets before we talk next, all right? Ta."

And she hung up and stalked across the room, clenching her jaw and struggling to walk through the pain without her cane.

The Crystal Gems are clever, she reasoned to herself, and tough. And they know how to play this game like pros. But there's no way they have the Jewels. They're just playing poker.

After a moment, she made her way back to the desk and finally let out a cry as pain flashed up and down her back. Hurriedly, she grabbed a container of Numorphan and hastily downed a few pills. And leaned back in her chair, waiting desperately for the relief to kick in.

They can play poker, Aquamarine thought. And maybe they can win the occasional hand. But they all forget one thing.

I own the fucking casino.

Chapter End Notes

Historical note: in case you didn't know, or else pick it up from his previous appearance, Richard Helms was a real person. He served as CIA director under Johnson and Nixon and had led the Agency's covert operations (especially their assassination plots against Fidel Castro in the early '60s) long before that. By the time of this story, he'd left the
CIA to serve as Gerald Ford's Ambassador to Iran.
"I'm sorry that my warning didn't reach you sooner," Sapphire said. "I trust the Fates, but I don't always trust the Postal Service."

Garnet smirked. "The Postal Service wasn't the problem," she muttered, looking from Sapphire, calm and placid as ever, over to Ruby, looking furious and ready to fight with anyone, still showing bruises and injuries from her rough treatment by Aquamarine.

"You didn't tell your friends, did you?" Sapphire said.

Garnet seemed a little surprised - not that Sapphire would know that, but that she'd confront her so directly.

"I didn't," Garnet admitted, her face sad and tinged with guilt.

"You did it for the right reasons, I'm sure," Sapphire offered. "You wanted to protect your friends and not get them upset before you knew what you were up against. It's understandable. And...you can't have predicted when and what Aquamarine would do."

"Yes," Garnet said, considering her words. "But I failed to protect my friends. And that's the problem...I didn't trust them to handle that information the right way. And...what kind of ally...what kind of friend am I if I can't do that?"

"Not to interrupt, Sapphire, but...this isn't a therapy session," Ruby growled, cutting in. "State your piece."

"Ruby, please," Sapphire interrupted. "But, she is right, Garnet. As much as I'd like to help you untangle your personal guilt, you must have another reason for coming here."

"Yes," Garnet admitted.

"They took your friend," Sapphire guessed.

"Yes. Quite violently, in fact."

"And you're worried whether she's alive or not."

"Hmm."

Sapphire nodded. After a moment, she closed her eyes and concentrated, as if meditating.

"She is alive," Sapphire said.

"Do you know where she is?"

Sapphire pretended to conjure an image.

"She is...in a location not far from here. I don't know the address, but she's...in a black site. Somewhere near the Potomac. I can smell the water and the car exhausts. She's in a basement somewhere, two men - or women - watching her constantly. They're treating her terribly."
Garnet gritted her teeth. That much, she'd guessed on her own.

"I believe they're keeping her alive because they expect her to talk," Sapphire offered.

Garnet sighed and looked down at the floor. She wondered what she was even doing here, if this "psychic" could only offer the most obvious information. If her visions were worthless.

Maybe Amethyst was right about her. Maybe this was a waste of time.

She decided to put her faith to the test.

"I have another request," Garnet asked.

"Oh? What is it?" Sapphire asked. Garnet was amused to have genuinely surprised Sapphire, for once.

"My friends and I know that they have Lazuli for a reason. She knows the whereabouts of some sensitive files and they're using her to locate them."


"Do you know where they are?" Garnet asked, more pointedly than before.

Sapphire concentrated again. Garnet looked away to Ruby, who stared at her with her arms crossed and an angry scowl, sensing Garnet's growing skepticism.

"It's a blank," Sapphire said sadly.

Garnet sighed and stood up.

"Thank you, Sapphire," she said guardedly.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't be more helpful," the psychic offered.

"Well, one's powers aren't always on, are they?" Garnet asked, not wanting to give offense but eager to leave. "I appreciate your time and effort on my behalf."

"Please stop by again," Sapphire said, a hint of desperation creeping into her voice. "I value our conversations so much."

Garnet stopped for a moment, but said nothing. And exited through the beaded curtain, her faith shattered. And, at the same time, her own guilt towards my behalf compounded.

"I've been telling you Sapphire's running a scam for years," Amethyst chided her friend. "Amazed it took you this long to figure it out!"

"I never thought she was actually psychic," Garnet grumbled defensively. "But she does know things that aren't common knowledge. I don't especially care how she knows them, so long as they're accurate."

"Fair enough, but come on, G," Amethyst said. "She's a con artist. She pretends she's psychic so she can sell books and make money off of idiots..." She winced seeing Garnet's reaction to that comment.
"...Sorry, I didn't mean..."

"No, it's all right," Garnet sighed. "Maybe I am an idiot if I thought she could actually help us. Unless she's an actual psychic, there's no way she's gonna find Lapis, let alone where the Jewels are located."

"Well, if the spirit world isn't gonna help us, we mere mortals have some work to do," Amethyst reminded her. "We're gonna see if we can make the exchange with Helms and Aquamarine by the end of the day."

"What are you going to give them?" Garnet asked. "They're gonna want something from us to show good faith."

"Perry's got it covered," Amethyst said. "She's getting something together right now that should satisfy them."

"Oh?" Garnet raised her eyebrow separately.

"Remember that she works for a Senator," Amethyst reminded Garnet. "She has access to a lot of classified shit. Plus, she can bullshit with the best of them."

Garnet chuckled slightly. But she still looked upset, and Amethyst couldn't figure out why.

"Hey, don't feel bad," Amethyst said. "So we're gonna have to do the spade work on our own. That's not so bad, is it?"

"It's not that," Garnet commented, still reluctant to come to terms with what was really bothering her.

"I knew," she said finally.

"Knew what?"

Garnet looked away from Amethyst. "Sapphire warned me that Aquamarine and her crew were coming the night before they did. And I didn't tell you."

"Wait, how did she warn you?" Amethyst asked.

Garnet reached into her pocket and pulled out the crumpled tarot card.

"What a load of bullshit," Amethyst murmured, throwing it in a trash bin. "Typical Sapphire."

"No, it's a Tower card which means that peril or death is imminent," Garnet said. "But I didn't know the details. I guess that's why...I didn't want to alarm you without having time to look into it or get ready. I didn't think..."

She sighed again, and sat down at a desk, still unable to face Amethyst. Amethyst could tell this had been weighing on her for some time.

"Garnet, it's all right," Amethyst said. "You couldn't have known..."

"It's not that," Garnet interrupted. "It's that...We place so much premium on trusting each other, and...a lot of times, we don't. You and I don't tell Pearl a lot of things, and...I don't know how much she knows, but she's smart. She can guess. And you know how Pearl gets about things like that."

Amethyst nodded and moved closer.
"And now this...I'm a bad partner," Garnet said. "A terrible friend. I rely on you ladies to have my back, and you always do."

"You think you don't have our back too?" Amethyst said gently. "G, trust me, swords and whips aren't worth shit without your shotgun behind us."

Garnet just grunted in response to this.

"Besides, now I'm curious about what you're keeping from me," Amethyst joked. Though Garnet didn't take it that way; she looked away and choked back a sob.

"I'm sorry," Garnet said. Amethyst lost control and walked over, giving Garnet a tight, firm hug. "I'm not gonna hold it against you," Amethyst assured Garnet. "You know that. Any more than you hold me being me against me."

It took Garnet a moment to untangle that sentence's syntax, then she snickered.

"Well, we still need to tell each other the truth," Garnet said, more to herself than Amethyst. "And not hide anything. Otherwise, what good is our working together?"

Amethyst nodded. "Agreed."

The two remained in each others' arms for a long moment, their tears turning to an awkward chuckle.

"This mission's forcing me to be a lot more serious than I usually am," Amethyst said, only half-joking this time. "First Pearl, then you. I'm not sure I'm cut out to be the rock everyone leans on for strength."

"You're stronger than you think," Garnet assured her, pulling away from Amethyst. And Amethyst felt happy hearing this.

Their moment was wrecked, however, by Peridot bursting into the room with a bulging briefcase.

"Guys, guess what?" she enthused. "I made it into Senator Dewey's office and procured some facsimiles of the latest load of Agency files we received..."

"Dewey still lets you in the building, huh?" Amethyst snarked.

"For now," Peridot said, opening the briefcase and starting to lay some files out on the desk.

"Here we have it, about 250 pages' worth of bureaucratic mess, communications cables and so forth. Most of it's pretty banal stuff, but we didn't agree to give them the entire document, just a selection of it for leverage. I'm sure we can sort through this mess and find some juicy bits to compile into a makeshift file."

"Nice job, Peridot," Garnet assured her with her trademark thumbs up.

"Yeah, this is great," Amethyst said, looking over the papers. "I just hope they're dumb enough to fall for it."

"Or at least willing to play long enough to keep Lapis alive," Garnet said.

Peridot shuddered at their words, but managed to keep it together. And noticed the tears drying on Garnet and Amethyst's faces. And couldn't help grinning.
"So, what did I miss?"

Before they could answer, a telephone rang. The threesome looked at each other uncertainly, until Peridot went over and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Peridot!"

Peridot instantly recognized the voice on the other end; and her heart skipped a beat.

"Lapis! Oh my God, you're okay!"

"Okay is a matter of perspective..." she groaned, her voice barely above a whisper. "But I'm alive. For the moment."

"What are they doing to you?" Peridot asked, struggling to restrain her voice until Garnet placed a steadying hand on her shoulder.

"Treating me to the best hospitality money can buy," Lapis said sarcastically. "Steak and lobster for every meal. I've probably gained about twenty pounds in the past few days since I've seen you."

A long sigh which sent a chill down Peridot's spine. She couldn't keep up the pretense any more.

"Anyway. They're in the room listening to me, so I can't tell you anything useful. Just...They want their first delivery. There's a locker in Union Station where you need to drop it off..."

"How do we know we can trust them not to set up a sting?" Peridot asked. Garnet and Amethyst exchanged a suspicious glance.

"You don't. But you'll have to trust me."

Peridot wanted to trust Lapis so bad. But she knew it wasn't really Lapis talking - at least, the words weren't hers.

"I'll do my best," Peridot said.

"Good," Lapis said.

"Lapis..." Peridot barked in panic as the call suddenly dropped. She dropped the receiver and stared into space, terrified.

"Did she give you the locker number?" Garnet asked.

Peridot was so stricken by what had just happened that she almost forgot. She had to hastily scramble her brain to think of what she'd just learned.

"Yeah, locker 329, I think."

"You think? Or you know?" Garnet asked, evenly but firmly.

"Locker 329," Peridot repeated, punctuating her assurance with a resolute nod.

"Well, let's start going through this mess," Amethyst said.

The phone rang again, and everyone froze again. This time Garnet picked up the telephone.
"Hello?"

"The Family Jewels are located at a farmhouse outside Toledo, Ohio." Garnet instantly recognized Sapphire's voice, speaking with her usual firmness and conviction. "It's an old property that once belonged to a Welsh farmer named Damien Llewelyn and was abandoned several years ago. No one's living there now, so it's probably rundown and beat up. I do not know the address or the precise location, but you should be able to find it through land records and newspaper searches and, you know, primary research."

"What...?" Garnet sputtered, baffled not by the information itself but at Sapphire providing something that detailed and uncalled for. And that soon after she'd decided to disavow her friend.

"Are you still in DC?" Sapphire asked.

"For now," Garnet answered.

"But you sent your friend Pearl to Toledo, because Lapis told you they were in the vicinity."

"Hmm."

"Well, get word to her however you feel it's safe - send a telegram if you have to - and have her do the necessary legwork until you get up there. In the meantime...Don't try and find Lapis Lazuli. They are expecting that. Even if you find the location where they're holding her, you're gonna walk straight into an ambush and get cut to pieces. Bye bye, Crystal Gems, and good night, Lapis Lazuli."

"We just heard from Lapis," Garnet said. "She is alive...like you said."

"Yes, that's a ploy to shake your nerves and win your trust. Garnet, whatever else might be said about Helms and Aquamarine and the rest of these people, they aren't stupid. They know that you're playing them. And I wouldn't make that drop off at Union Station, either."

Garnet didn't expect to hear this, either. She stared at her colleagues, who were listening in expectantly, then back at the phone as it sunk in.

"Well, we need to do something," she said. "At least pretend we're still playing along. If we just run off in the middle of this..."

"Just find another way," Sapphire said mysteriously. "I can't offer you a solution to your problems. That's on you. But I know you and your friends aren't stupid either."

"I hope you're right," Garnet muttered.

"And Garnet, one thing I didn't get to say earlier..."

"Hmm?"

"I don't know how much you can, or should trust me. Maybe not at all, any more. But there are more important things than that."

"Trust your friends. And more importantly, trust yourself."

The phone clicked. And Garnet hung up.

"Well?" Amethyst demanded.

Garnet looked around at her friends again, all waiting expectantly for her to suggest a course of
"Change of plans," Garnet said. "The Union Station bit is a set up. We're gonna have to find another way to outsmart them while keeping the game alive."

And she snapped into action, walking over to the table and grabbing about twenty pieces of paper at random. She snapped up a paperclip and attached them together.

"Peridot, mail these to the State Department courtesy of Richard Helms," she said. "Express mail. Pay for extra stamps. It should reach him by the end of the day if we do this right."

"But, you just picked up papers at random," Peridot sputtered, looking through the documents Garnet had clipped together.

"Does it matter? Either way, they're gonna figure out we're playing around with them once they open it. Stick in a manila folder and we've bought a little time."

"What's our next move?" Amethyst said.

"Get in touch with Pearl and Greg," Garnet said. "Do we know where they're staying?"

"They said they'd call us once they reached Toledo," Amethyst reminded her.

"Hmm. Well, my concern is that they could easily tap this telephone. If they called here, they know where we are."

"Then it's probably best if we go somewhere else," Peridot said.

"Not yet. If we move too suddenly they'll be ready for us. Let's wait it out at least until this evening. Then we hightail it up to Ohio."

"What if Aquamarine calls our bluff?" Peridot asked, her voice cracking with panic. "What if she just...kills Lapis? Because they didn't get what they want. Or maybe even for fun. What if we get the documents and it doesn't even matter? Or what if we don't?"

Garnet looked at Peridot, who seemed on the verge of tears.

"It will matter," she said, her voice steeled with conviction. "Even if Lapis dies...We can expose these documents. You can give them to the committee. We can leak them to the press. There are a million things we can still do after that."

Peridot didn't seem much comforted by the thought.

"Lapis isn't expendable," Garnet assured Peridot. "She's our friend now as much as yours. And we'll save her if we can. But trying to find where they're holding her is a waste of time. This way, we control the cards. We have the initiative and we force them to fight on our turf. And this time, we'll be ready for them."

Her little pep talk went over swimmingly with Amethyst. Her usual brash smile returned and she looked ready for a fight. But Peridot still seemed uncertain.

"I can't and won't promise anything," Garnet said gently. "But you're a vital member of the team. Besides, you're in it now regardless. You're a Crystal Gem, whether you like it or not."

"I'm a Crystal Gem?" Peridot said quietly.
Garnet nodded and smiled.

Peridot's face broke into a smile, and her old energy returned.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" she said, bursting into frantic activity. "Let's deliver these papers and shove them up Aquamarine's ass!"

Garnet and Amethyst exchanged a look and a knowing smile.
Thanks as always to my reviewers: xBreadboi, WhatHappened and DreamlandB! I love reading your comments!

Warning: this chapter contains some intense, though not graphic descriptions of interrogation and psychological torture.

October 7, 1975

Lapis didn't know how much time had passed since speaking with Peridot. It could have been hours, it could have been days. No way of knowing.

She sat in a dark basement somewhere, alone. She wasn't bound or handcuffed to anything as she might have expected; it was too secure and too dark for any movement to do any good.

At first she'd been too tired and suffered too much pain to really move or do anything. Her eyes seemed unable to adjust to the darkness; there wasn't a single point of light or shade she could use as a reference point. So she just laid there, thinking. Trying to keep herself sane.

No idea where she was. She'd lost consciousness the instant Jasper had punched her back at the beach house. She flashed awake once or twice on the car ride, only to be sedated by another large woman she didn't recognize. The rest of the trip was spent in a deep, dreamless sleep.

Then she woke up here.

After awhile she started to move again. Tried to determine how large the cell was, feeling her way blindly across the room. She guessed it was about ten feet before she bumped into a wall.

Then a light flickered on, blinding her. But she could make out the outlines of someone walking towards her. And they were holding a syringe.

Lapis knew what was coming, but was too weak and disoriented to fight back. She might have managed a few feeble "nos" before she felt the prick of the syringe against her arm.

"Ma'am, just relax," a calm, male voice insisted as she pulled away from him. "You aren't in any danger and won't suffer any further pain. Pretty soon you'll tell us everything we want to know."

"You won't get anything from me," Lapis hissed defiantly.

"Just wait a minute and you'll discover that you're wrong," the man responded. Lapis thought she detected a trace of a foreign accent, but couldn't place it.

It didn't take long for Lapis to start feeling lightheaded. But she managed to stand and face her tormentor, struggling to make out his outline through the harsh light.

"Who are you?" she asked.
"I'm a Doctor," he said, still preternaturally calm. "I'm here to ensure that no harm comes to you during your interrogation. Of course, if you cooperate like we expect, my presence should be superfluous. Aquamarine said that you're a tough girl and won't be suggestible to violence, so we're trying another way."

"What other way?" Lapis said. Her thoughts started growing cloudy as she spoke.

"There are many ways to bring the truth out of someone," the Doctor said. "Many kinds of interrogation. Direct application of pain is simply the crudest and most dramatic. Sometimes we can use water or psychological threats to break down resistance. Sometimes electricity works, though it's even more crude than just hitting someone. But drugs...well, they have their flaws. They don't always work. But they're worth trying. Especially in a controlled environment."

"I don't care what you give me..." Lapis began. But her knees startled to buckle, and she felt faint.

"Don't fight it," the Doctor said, almost soothingly. "Just wait a minute or two longer and we can begin. And all the pain you've experience will be an unpleasant memory."

Lapis felt herself starting to sweat, even as her heart slowed and her head started to spin harder. Her temples pounded in her ears.

She collapsed to her knees, then slumped forward. It was a struggle now just to keep her head RAISED.

"Nothing you give me will make me talk," she insisted, her voice audible only through great effort.

"We'll see," the Doctor said, his voice growing distorted in Lapis's ears.

Lapis blinked and, for the briefest of moments, her vision suddenly clear. She could see the doctor, a middle aged man with a bland smile and horn-rim glasses, standing before her.

And behind him, Jasper and the other tall woman from the car stood. The second woman's face was appropriately grim, but Jasper's, as always, had the hint of sadistic sneer.

Lapis opened her mouth to scream, but only the quietest, saddest squeak escaped.

Then the light flashed again, and everything spun into a blur. And a barrage of voices demanding the same thing from her.

"Where are the Jewels? Where did you hide them? I know you can speak...Don't play dumb."

"You have to give the drug a chance to take effect..."

"Where are the Jewels, Lazuli? We'll ask until you tell us..."

"Jasper, please be careful..."

"Fuck off with your concern, Topaz. It's annoying and useless and weak...much like yourself. Besides, Lapis and I have a history..."

"Then maybe, if you can't be dispassionate you ought not to be present."

"I believe I've earned the right to do what I want."

...Silence...Faded, flashing images and indistinct sounds...
...Faces she recognized, voices she didn't...

...Until a new voice came into her ears...sweet, melodic, yet even more menacing than Jasper or Topaz...

"Miss Lazuli, I know you aren't stupid. You aren't talking because you know that's the best key to staying alive...Or, at least you think so. Which is why I'll tell you the plain truth..."

...Another flash into darkness, garbled images struggling to process through her mind...

"...You're expendable."

"Where are the Jewels, Lapis?"

"Where did you say? Somewhere in..."

Every now and then, a distinct question or phrase punctured through the gloom, but mostly it was aural chaos, one sentence indistinguishable from the next, one voice bleeding into another...

"...Secrets from us. Well, we can't have that, because we're the ones who keep the secrets, not you..."

"...Where are they?"

"...Did you give her too much?"

"I worked out a careful dosage..."

"Just let me break her fingers! That'll do the trick..."

"Lapis, please talk! We don't want to hurt you, but..."

"You have to realize there are consequences to your actions..."

"...Where are the Jewels? We know you still have them somewhere..."

"Just tell us where they are..."

"...Fine, it's your mission in life to suffer. Your fate. Your just desserts..."

"...That's all we need to know..."

"...You're worthless...and you think keeping a secret and protecting your friends will make you strong...But you're wrong..."

"...The truth, Lapis. That's it..."

"...You're Lapis Lazuli, no matter what you say or do..."

"...That would be enough..."

"...You're Lapis Lazuli..."

After awhile, Lapis started to think the voices were inside her own head.

Maybe, after awhile, they were.
Did she answer? Did she tell them anything?

She couldn't remember. She didn't think so.

But if she didn't, why did they stop?

And, for that matter, how long until they came back?

And what would happen then?

It took awhile for her mind and her body to return to something like normal. By then, the light had turned out and the voices were gone.

And it didn't seem to matter. Because she knew they'd be back.

The government had already done so much to her mind and body, why not reclaim it wholesale?

So she sat in the dark, trying not to cry, trying not to go insane or to let her depression devour her, as it always did when she was alone with her thoughts. Trying to think of something, *anything* to keep the darkness out of her mind.

Eventually she managed to play through a fantasy that gave her a few moments of peace.

Her and Peridot, in a house somewhere, together.

Lapis standing at the kitchen counter, making food (a strange detail, since she couldn't cook anything more complicated than a TV dinner. But then she felt pretty sure Peridot couldn't either). Wearing a pretty sundress. Her hair, in a strange detail, dyed a bright, vibrant blue again.

Peridot sitting at the kitchen table, wearing work clothes, reading a newspaper.

The two of them chuckling at something silly. Lapis holding Peridot close, kissing her forehead and refusing to let go.

They were talking, but Peridot couldn't make out any words that they were saying. Which was fine. It was a vague fantasy, not a definite story.

The scene ended in a tableaux of them embracing with a warmth, a simple contentedness never found it real life, even under optimal circumstances. But it brought a tear to Lapis's eye every time she thought about it.

It was a waking dream that kept her going. Something positive. Something to look forward to.

Something that offered her hope.

It amazed her how much she cared about Peridot after such a short acquaintance. It amazed her that she could still let someone into heart, that someone else could still matter to her.

She still had Catherine somewhere in the back of her mind. Always wondered what had happened to her after that night her life went horribly wrong. Never particularly cared to find out. Because the thought of her first love being sad and unfulfilled crushed Lapis even more. And selfishly, the thought of her being happy without her made her feel even worse.

Maybe Lapis didn't matter. Maybe she was an awful person who had done unforgivable things. Things that ruined her life on Earth and doomed her to Hell afterwards. Things she couldn't escape.
Maybe she was Evil, as she'd said to Peridot on the beach, as she told herself constantly since then.

But Peridot wasn't.

And, she thought, *neither are the Crystal Gems.*

And, she dreamed, *there might be a chance they could make a difference. That the world could be made better.*

And, she hoped, *maybe even I can play a part. Maybe I can do something to make my life worthwhile.*

She warmed to the thought, even if she didn't yet fully believe it. But in that moment, a fire long extinguished rekindled in Lapis's heart.

There were things to live for, now. A **person** to live for.

That would be enough.

And, she decided, *I am going to live. I am getting out of here.*

*If it kills me.*

She barely remembered her phone call with Peridot, except that it happened. The woman - Topaz? - gave her a notepad which she read from, then disconnected the phone once Lapis had said what she needed.

Lapis never talked to her interrogators unless she had to. But it was easy to size them up.

The Doctor was a cool, calm, professional sadist. It's clear he regarded Lapis as a subject or even as a plaything rather than a person, any conversation or protests she made an amusing novelty, like a talking doll. Not worth the effort, and Lapis didn't bother after awhile.

Topaz was the Good Cop. She was the one who seemed human. Who did what she did because she had to, but clearly let it eat at her. Who found the whole thing distasteful and irritating at best. But Lapis never got any time alone with her, so she didn't see much chance of reaching out for help. And there was no way in Hell she trusted her, anyway.

There's always someone who plays cool to get on your good side, lets you spill your guts and open up and admit your secret plans. And then smashes you with the hammer of the Gods.

Lapis had done this long enough to realize when she was being played. So she kept her distance from Topaz, no matter the apparent hesitation or reticent looks on her face.

She didn't see Aquamarine often enough to really know much about her. But she recognized her voice every time she did. The accent, the sweetly-condescending tone, the doom-laden threats and imprecations laced with sweetness and silk.

She was hopeless. The kind of monster who relished being a villain, who had forfeited their humanity long ago.

And then there was Jasper.

Jasper was the only one Lapis really feared. At least at first. Because she and Jasper had a history.
Because she was the reason Jasper was involved in this situation in the first place.

She still couldn't figure out how Jasper had survived getting shot at such close range. Or if she really had. Because she coughed constantly, occasionally spouting blood, occasionally so weakened by her fits that she had to rush out of the room in the middle of an interrogation.

That could have given Lapis some comfort, an awful person suffering a slow, painful death. Except it was Lapis's fault she was there.

She had double the reason to hurt her, now. And if her days were numbered, she might be even more reckless, more unstable.

And Lapis certainly guessed that from her talk.

Jasper had always seemed crude and violent before. And she was still both of those things. But there was a strange serenity to her voice, however savage and cutting her words. A glint in her eye that wasn't there before.

Lapis struggled to puzzle out what it meant. The first thought was that Jasper had simply grown unhinged, and maybe there was some of that. But, unhinged how? That would determine how she'd act, what she'd do to her.

She seemed to relish asking Lapis questions, even if Aquamarine didn't usually allow her to inflict Lapis herself. The one exception came when she tried waterboarding Lapis, and nearly drowned her by dumping a whole bucket of water on her head at once. Aquamarine dismissed her from the room and took over the interrogation at once. But she could deliver words with a venom that shook Lapis to her core.

She'd wronged many people in her life. Some who deserved it, some who didn't. But Jasper was one of those who could hurt her back. Or worse.

"All right, brat. I know you're not gonna tell me anything more, and I'm not authorized to use force. Pretty sure we're being watched as we speak."

She pulled a chair into the middle of the room and sat under the light. Lapis sat with her head between her knees.

"Let's put something straight: you will talk. It's only a matter of time, and finding the right way to make you talk. You've endured a lot of mess, and I give you credit for that. But then, I don't imagine you have much of a soul left."

Lapis said nothing, staring at the floor.

"If you had one to begin with."

Jasper clearly wanted to get a rise out of her. So Lapis pursed her lips and refused to acknowledge her.

"I don't know what makes a girl that way," Jasper continued, her tone more conversational than intimidating. "You're given an opportunity to serve your country and you piss it all away. For what?"

"Given an opportunity?" Lapis snapped at that. Jasper smiled in satisfaction at eliciting a reaction.

"I was blackmailed into doing this job," Lapis said. "I never wanted to do it in the first place! And
now I'm here because...it was all your fault."

Jasper shook her head.

"No Lapis, that's where you're wrong. In fairness, it's not really your fault, either. God made you the way you were, for reasons only He knows. Still, you gotta play with the cards you're dealt. You still have free will and the ability to control your life."

Lapis put her head down again and clensed her eyes shut.

"Even if you have these unnatural urges, surely you didn't have to act on them. You could have dated or even married a nice boy and settled down and kept that part of yourself hidden. Locked away. Like so many other people."

Lapis hated the words, hated Jasper's hatred. But she detected a note of weariness and self-loathing in her own voice.

"But instead, you did what you did, and you got caught. Found out. And that's on you. Not us. Not whoever lured you to that party or gave you that drink or took those photographs. That was you. If you had nothing to hide, no one would have been able to set you up. No one would have made you work for us. No one would have made you...this."

Lapis hoped that her mind was strong enough to resist Jasper's taunts. One slip up, one external confirmation of her own darkest fears, and the circle of gloom and depression would begin again. And from there, no hope.

"Looked at your file, Lapis, I'm impressed. You wrote and said and did some heinous shit while you were an operative. Really went above and beyond the call of duty. There was a memo from an agent to Jim Angleton marking you as "our top domestic surveillance agent in the Midwest, known for her ruthless and innovative methods." High praise indeed!"

Lapis gritted her teeth, wishing Jasper would stop. Instead, she continued.

"Given what I knew about you, I was a bit puzzled. At first I thought, hey, maybe she just took professional pride in her work."

"But then I thought, maybe she liked it. Maybe she enjoyed destroying people. And maybe she's an even bigger monster than I am."

Lapis had had this exact conversation with herself a million times. She didn't need Jasper telling her all this (which, she assumed, is why Jasper did just that, especially given her gleeful, sadistic tone). Her face flushed with fear and embarrassment. But she said nothing in response.

"That's the difference between you and me, Lapis. I'm just a thug. I'm not all that smart - clever, maybe; crafty, sure - but not a genius. I could never think of how to write a poison pen letter like this or figure out how to unravel a radical group from the inside out using only words. I'm on the business end of things. I'm a blunt instrument whereas you're a fine-tipped pen. I don't really mind my work, most of the time, but I'm not sure I ever enjoyed it.

"So maybe," she said, flashing Lapis another leonine grin, "that means you're worse than me!"

Lapis felt a dam burst in her brain. She could barely hear Jasper's actual words over her own angry, self-loathing thoughts crashing against her.
"A person who isn't guilty doesn’t try to kill herself. Repeatedly. I thought about that, too."

Was Jasper talking? Or was Lapis saying this to herself?

"And that's why I'm going to kill you."

That one was definitely Jasper.

Lapis looked up at her tormentor, who had stood up from the chair and started moving towards her. She gasped and slunk backwards.

"Oh, not today. Not while you're of use to us. Not while you have information to recover. But I figured there must be a reason why I survived getting shot, and you're it."

She looked at Jasper and saw that strange sheen in her eye again. And gasped.

"Don't you see, Lapis?" she asked. "You can't kill me! Because I'm destined to kill you! God saved both of us for a purpose. To cleanse your sin, and mine, in one glorious burst of bloodletting. It's only a matter of time..."

"You're crazy," Lapis whispered, backing towards the wall.

"Maybe," Jasper agreed, though the thought only made her smile wider. "But, as you and I know full well, God can work through anyone. Especially the mad."

Something snapped inside Lapis's brain. She couldn't take it any more.

She stood up with a cry, rushed forward and headbutted the woman in the chest. Aiming as close as she could to the gunshot wound.

Jasper fell backwards a step or two, not harmed or affected much by the blow itself. At first she seemed more amused than hurt.

After a moment, though, she started coughing again. Deep, hacking coughs that rumbled through her chest and shook her body.

Coughs that wouldn't stop.

And Lapis knew that she had hit her target. And a small, satisfied smirk spread across her face.

If she had any hope of escape, any idea what she would do next, she might have used her remaining strength to overpower Jasper and flee. But there wasn't.

Instead, the door of the room burst open. And Topaz walked in, grabbing Jasper and escorting her out of the room as she kept coughing, violently.

"Next time..." Jasper started to say, until another coughing fit overtook her.

The door closed, leaving Lapis alone.

She sat back down on the floor, trying to beat down the demons coursing through her mind, trying to think again of Peridot and the Crystal Gems and all the good they might accomplish. All the happiness that laid in store.

If only she fought.
If only she survived.

The light overhead turned off, leaving Lapis in darkness.
Ohio

October 8, 1975

Toledo, OH

Pearl hadn't exactly relished the idea of spending time alone with Greg. Let alone a cross country road trip.

But they'd managed to drive about ten hours without killing each other, so that was a start. Admittedly, it had something to do with them not exchanging more than about twenty words the whole trip, only acknowledging one another's presence when they needed to make a rest stop or grab a quick bite from a roadside burger place. But the system seemed to work.

By now, they'd been in Toledo for the better part of two days. Not much of a city, though it had a nice art museum (sorry, Museum of Art - they were very insistent about that) and some decent restaurants and a nice view of Lake Erie, though too chilly this time of year for Pearl to enjoy it much. She liked warm weather, and she was still recovering from her assorted physical traumas, no matter how brave a face she put on things.

At first they had little idea of what to do and wasted time putting around the town, lounging around the hotel or generally wasting time. Not really speaking with each other or sure how to proceed. Until Garnet gave them a phone call with the information gleaned from Sapphire. The name Damien Llewelyn was the key.

It was Greg who came up with the bright idea of posing as Llewelyn's family. Pearl should have known by now not to underestimate him. But then she still felt like she didn't know him at all.

"Yes, the Llewelyn farm's about twelve miles outside the city," a helpful clerk at the land registry office said. "Right outside Sylvania, I think, up near the Michigan state line. Nobody's been out that way so far as I know for a few years. Mr. Llewelyn moved back to Cardiff around 1968 and left it to some family members, but...they never showed up to claim the property."

"Um...surprise!" Pearl said. "Sorry it took so long, but we've been busy with, you know..."

She looked to Greg for help. This time, Greg shrugged, lacking an answer.

"Different things..." Greg added unhelpfully, rubbing the back of his head. Catching the clerk's suspicious glare, he fumbled for an answer.

"Business, work, travel...kinda hard to make time to check up on some old family holdings when you've got so much stuff going on, ya know? Especially a relative from Wales who you barely know. Still a bit surprised he gave us the farm in the first place, to be honest."

The clerk nodded, though there was still a skeptical glint in his eyes. But he didn't seem interested in pressing matters too much.

"Well, you're free to check out the place," the clerk said. "I can find you the address if you give me a moment."
"Sure, we're not in any hurry," Pearl said. Greg put an arm around Pearl's shoulder; she struggled to hide her discomfort with a smile.

The clerk rolled his eyes, then disappeared into a back room.

"And Garnet said we'd have to do primary research," Pearl muttered.

"Hey, I guess that's why she sent me," Greg said with a little boastfulness. "Always creative."

"Yes, well, you're certainly being creative with your attitude," Pearl complained, fussily brushing his arm off her shoulder.

"Jeez, I'm sorry," Greg said, mildly offended. "Didn't realize I was so dirty."

"It's not a matter of being dirty," Pearl sputtered. "Your hygiene seems...better than usual. It's just..."

Greg glared at her for a moment. Then nodded, realizing that he'd crossed some line and deciding not.

"Hey, it was a spur of the moment thing," he said apologetically. "Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable..."

Pearl sighed. "Didn't mean to be such a bitch," she said. Greg snorted at the word, surprised to hear Pearl swear.

She was trying. She really was. She thought they'd made some progress back in Beach City, but...apparently not. Still too much to overcome.

And she wasn't sure this was the time to set things right.

Pearl snapped out of her thoughts as the clerk reappeared. He wrote the address down on a small piece of note paper and passed it to her. She and Greg thanked the man and walked out to his van.

"Well, do we go out there now?" Pearl asked. "It's still pretty early."

"Eh, this town's kind of a dump," Greg admitted. "But, it is Ohio. I'm not sure what more there is to see."

"I'm sure parts of Ohio are nice," Pearl said. "But remember, we're not here to sight see."

"Guess you're right," Greg replied. "It's just...I dunno, I don't think there's any harm in taking in the local color."

"The local color is bland beige and grime black," Pearl said haughtily. "Not my ideal template for fun."

"Maybe we should wait for Garnet and Amethyst to come up here," Greg said. "Ya know, just in case there's somebody lying in wait, or we need to fight back or something like that."

Pearl felt another stab of insecurity, a ripple of pain from her still-healing wounds. She took Greg's words not as advice, but as a challenge.

"The more time we waste, the less time we'll have to prepare!" Pearl responded, louder and angrier than she intended. "Why do you want to waste so much time, Greg? Can't you take this seriously?"

"Whoa, I don't wanna waste time, Pearl," Greg insisted, raising his hands defensively. "And hey,
unless you forgot, I got my head bashed the other day, too. I'm still having vision problems because of it. And yet I drove us most of the way up here. So I'd say I'm taking it pretty damn seriously."

Pearl stayed silent, not sure what to say or how to apologize. And angry at herself.

She'd always mess this up. No matter how much progress they seemed to make, she kicked them back to the starting point.

"I'm just saying," Greg said, a little more calmly, "you're still getting over being hurt. And I'm...you know I'm no good in a fight. I don't think I'd be a lot of help if we run into trouble. If we had Garnet and Amethyst here..." And he trailed off, sighing.

"I'm fine," Pearl said quietly. Though she wondered at that.

"Anyway...let's head back to the hotel and figure out what to do from there," Greg said in a monotone voice as he shifted the van into gear. "And I feel a bad headache coming on, anyway."

Pearl looked out the window forlornly, angry at herself for not being a better person.

Greg really did need to lay down. Getting beaten up and knocked unconscious wasn't a trip for him any more than Pearl.

As soon as they made it back to their hotel room, he turned the lights out, closed the blinds and...turned on the air conditioner.

"It's 40 degrees outside, Greg," Pearl scolded, feeling a shiver. "Do you really need it to be this cold?"

"Can't sleep without the AC," Greg grumbled, angrily fluffing the pillow.

"You slept at the beach house just fine," Pearl reminded him as she approached the AC, preparing to turn it off. "And it was much warmer there..."

"Pearl, can you just leave it alone?" Greg barked. "If you're uncomfortable, go down to the bar and, I dunno, get lunch or something. Or, hey, if you're up for solving this thing yourself...fine. Keys are on the nightstand. Just remember to bring 'em back when you're done."

And he pulled the blankets over his head and muttered.

Pearl felt a little shocked by his outburst. Usually Greg was pretty even-tempered and wouldn't shout or curse or anything, no matter how upset he was. But then, she reasoned, he did have a headache.

*And I'm giving him perfect cause to be angry*, Pearl reminded herself.

*I really thought we were past this. But after all that's happened...we still can't even stand to be in a room together."

*What would Rose think of me now? What would she think of us?*

She sighed and exited the hotel room, trying not to cry. She did, however, slam her fist against the wall once she was out of sight. And stood there, fuming.

Greg had one of those hellish migraine headaches too intense to let you sleep, but too debilitating for you to move or think or do anything. Any time he so much as raised his head, he felt a stab of pain
and a swirl of dizziness and nausea. He needed the room to be as dark and as quiet as possible, only the buzz of the air conditioner and the cool air giving him relief.

But he was still alone with his thoughts, and they were unforgiving.

*Why are you and Pearl still like this?* he wondered. *It's been two years since Rose died. Goddammit, we're both adults. We should be better than this.*

Pearl was a pill, he thought. Always had been. Always acted snotty and aloof around him, as if the very thought of Rose being with someone like *Him* was an appalling crime against reason.

But then, Greg often thought that himself. Just...not in a bad way.

He was grateful that Rose didn't see him the same way he often saw himself. Or others sometimes seemed to see him. Didn't matter that his music career was cratering or that he was getting old and starting to put on weight and lose his hair. What mattered to Rose was that he was Greg Universe.

He wondered if he idealized Rose too much. Certainly her death suggested that she was much less perfect than he'd realized. It was easier to put someone on a pedestal when you're in love...even easier when they're dead and gone and can't remind you of their flaws and imperfections.

And he wondered...no, he knew he gave Pearl too hard of a time over the years.

He understood why Pearl didn't want anything to do with him. He understood that he, too, could be stubborn and.

But she didn't even seem to try.

Except...she did. And he thought back to that night on the beach, when everything between them seemed okay for a moment.

When Pearl, despite looking and probably feeling like she was on death's door, came out to join them on the beach and ate his food and enjoyed his music and...liked spending time with him. Or at least didn't hate it.

So maybe their problem wasn't all her fault.

But Greg couldn't think of what more he could do to help Pearl and him move past this.

All could he think of is that, if nothing else, the two of them would have to put their bullshit aside to complete this damn mission, and hopefully not be killed in the bargain.

For Rose. For the Crystal Gems.

*That's* what mattered.

But first, he needed to sleep off this fucking headache.

Pearl didn't have the heart to go searching on her own. Instead she hung around the hotel bar, ordered a sandwich and an iced tea, absently looking through a travel guide for something local to do.

Television was on again. *Again* the damn hearings. Today they were interrogating someone from the Internal Revenue Service about past presidents' harassment of political opponents through taxes and audits. Pearl couldn't even pretend to care.
"Are these damn things ever gonna end?" someone asked to no one in particular. "They're still going on after all this, and for what? Just to make our country look bad."

"I hope they end soon," Pearl said in as cheerful a voice as she could manage, dumping a sweetener packet into her tea.

"You and me both," the man replied. "I hate what these people are doing to this country. Wrecking it so they can get headlines and applause. Well, fuck that."

Pearl made a distracted "hmm" sound as she stirred her tea. It was still too bitter for her taste, no matter how much sweetener she added to it.

She looked up and saw, to her surprise, that the man had taken her cordiality as an invitation to come over and vent. He was now pulling up a chair and sitting across from her. Pearl could see him wearing worn-out flannel work clothes, with unruly salt-and-pepper hair and unshaven stubble. He smelled heavily of cigarettes and aftershave.

"You see, I watch these hearings and I think...what are they even for? I mean, yesterday they were talking about stuff that happened back when Kennedy was president! That was, what, twelve years ago that they blew his head off! What does it matter now? Why does airing all this dirty laundry make any kind of difference?"

Pearl nodded and smiled politely, not sure what to say to him.

"Think about it, ma'am. Does it help you or me? Does it give people jobs? No. Does it fix the economy? Hell, no. It's just so the big gorillas on Capitol Hill can just beat their chest and make everyone feel angry and bad so they'll vote them for president."

Pearl's wry amusement turned to irritation, her smile fading into a smirk, then a grimace, then an angry glower.

Still, he blathered.

"None of these people have our interests at heart," he continued. "They're all the same. It's just about winning elections and making the other side look bad. And either way, they're gonna bring down the country. They're gonna make sure people don't trust their leaders and don't trust the functions of government and make America look bad. Like Communism is any better! Do you think Frank Church or Ted Kennedy would do well in Russia? No, they'd be in the gulag over there! Castro would put them in front of a firing squad! So why complain about what goes on here when there's so much"

And so he blathered on, about the moral fiber of the country being wrecked, about nobody having any trust in anyone any more, the death of Christian America. He seemed to have a particular bone to pick with "the homosexual menace," as he called it, ramblings which didn't endear him to Pearl. When he finished with that, he started ranting about Arabs buying all the oil and American businesses, and how America was great until the angry blacks and the stupid kids and the loud-mouthed hairy legged feminists and those damn liberals messed it all up.

All a mixture of angry opinions, some relatively well-thought-out, others recited from conservative editorials he'd read and half-digested, some nakedly contradicting each other, others just plain bigoted. The Silent Majority's Id laid bare.

Pearl was too polite to tell him to leave her alone. But she made her discomfort plain in every way; her expression, nervously shaking her legs under the table, fidgeting with her hands, looking past
him to the wall and the clock and occasionally the television. But he either didn't get the hint, or
didn't care.

"...And I think that's why they're doing this. To distract from how they're robbing us all blind and
making our country weaker and more pathetic, which is the first step on the road to socialism. Which
is why we need Ronald Reagan to be President in '76. Not this pansy-ass Jerry Ford, who's just
another one of these wimpy weenie limp-wristed fake Republicans who pals around with the
Rockefellers, and certainly not whatever idiot the Democrats are gonna dredge up to run against him.
We need a real man to lead this country and save us from all this mess."

*And what more real man is there, Pearl thought,* _than a washed-up actor whose most famous role
was opposite a chimp?*

"Don't you agree, ma'am?" he asked, fixing Pearl with an expectant smile. "I mean, does *any* of what
I say make sense?"

Pearl took a deep breath, wondering if it was worth trying to answer his tirade. She collected herself
until she managed a polite but even tone.

"Well, I do agree that few, if any leaders in Washington have our best interests at heart," she said.
"But that doesn't mean that none of them act from good motives, or that it's impossible..."

"Oh, there are always exceptions..." the man interrupted.

"...And certainly there are ways to make a change, and abject cynicism towards everything won't
achieve *anything.*"

Pearl's voice showed her irritation. But her words evinced an optimism that she hadn't expressed in
some time.

Peridot must have done a number on her.

"Hey, I'm not being cynical, I'm being *realistic,*" the man insisted, with a smugness that made Pearl
want to shatter his testicles.

"I don't think dismissing every attempt to make change in Washington as fake or phony is
*realistic,*" Pearl said. "Just defeatist. Nothing gets done with that attitude."

"Well, don't you think that's a bit naive, ma'am?" the man said, goading her on. "I mean, after all the
shit that's come out over the past few years..."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say," Pearl admitted, growing flustered and losing patience.

"What part?" he said. "I can slow down and repeat it for you..."

"Please don't," she said, on the last shred of her patience. "You keep insisting that the government is
corrupt and that everyone's out to get us and that they don't care about the people. And yet, when
someone presents evidence of all the misdeeds you complain about, you dismiss it as a conspiracy! A
liberal-socialist cabal to destroy America for God knows what purpose. That's ridiculous and
self-contradictory and mindbogglingly stupid."

"That's because they're not doing it for the right reason and...Hey, did you just call me stupid?"

"What's the right reason then?" Pearl was shouting and she didn't care.
"And I'm sure you're one of those Pauline Kael types who sits around in your smug little bubble wondering how anyone could have voted for Nixon twice. Well, this is why."

"I don't wonder why. I know why. Because some people are filled with hate and resentment and serious grievances about things they don't want to change. So they blame blacks and women and queers and kids and foreigners and Communists and liberals and anyone else...anyone except the real people who are responsible. Everything except a system skewed towards corruption and complacency and exploitation and lazy bigotry. Because it's easier to punch down than to try and change what's really wrong with this country."

The man sat back, overwhelmed by Pearl's outburst.

"Well, that's all well and good, but you won't get anywhere calling people bigots..."

"Maybe some people deserve it," Pearl insisted.

"Hey, there's no need to call names or to get hysterical..."

"Excuse me, you asked me for my opinion, and now you won't even let me express it."

"No reason for you to get upset," he repeated with a coarse chuckle. "Shoulda known a lady like you would get emotional talking about politics..."

"There's plenty in politics to get emotional about," Pearl growled.

The man chuckled again. "There sure is," he said, nodding his head sarcastically. Pearl hated the smug, dismissive expression on his face, regarding her like a freak of nature, species *Liberalus East Coastium*, unheard-of in Real America.

"But shouting about how Congress and the media are gonna mix everything isn't gonna do it," he continued. "Neither is losing control of your emotions and getting angry when a man explains the truth of a hard-lived life to you."

He got close and breathed his toxic tobacco breath in Pearl's face. And he got mean.

"You've never worked a real day in your life, have you, sweetie?" he demanded, with a gator-like viciousness that made Pearl blanch.

Pearl growled and kicked him in the knees, as hard as she could.

The man yelped and leaped backwards, nearly knocking over his chair. Pearl responded by grabbing her tea and splashing it on his face. He fell backwards, sputtering in surprise.

"Hey ma'am, chill out," the man said. "No call for acting like this..."

"No call for your acting like a chauvinist ass," Pearl said, gathering up her purse and things.

"Just trying to have a friendly conversation," he sputtered. "Hey!"

He grabbed Pearl's arm and pulled her close. Pearl turned, snarling angrily, and looked directly in his hateful face.

She looked askance at the bartender, who was meekly and helpfully pretending not to notice their altercation. Then she wished that she had her sword with her.

She was quick and tough, but not especially strong. She just hoped she was quick enough.
Pearl kneed the man in the stomach, then struck him across the throat, sending him sputtering backwards. Before he could recover, she grabbed him by the shirt and threw him into her table, knocking her tea and plate and napkins on the floor. The bartender stared gape-mouthed.

"A lot of help you were," Pearl said. She straightened her hair, grabbed her purse and walked back to their hotel room.

She knocked on the door, loudly and firmly. Greg slowly, angrily dragged himself to answer it.

"Pearl..." he complained, squinting at the light.

"Pack your things, Greg. We're checking out."

Greg just rolled his eyes and groaned. He could tell from Pearl's expression that there was no arguing with her.

What a wonderful trip this has been, he thought, struggling just to maintain his balance as he unlocked the door.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a rant in this chapter, even by my standards, but man it felt cathartic to write. I empathize so much with Pearl in the latter scene, it's not even funny. I've been on the receiving end of such many similar rants from coworkers over the past year-and-a-half...Anyway, thanks as always for indulging me.
Thanks for all my usual reviewers, and new ones too (Lediletant)! Your comments keep this story going and I'm really glad you're enjoying it.

October 8, 1975

Toledo, OH

Pearl's new friend wasn't willing to let well enough alone. Humiliating at getting his ass publicly kicked by a girl, he decided to beat some reactionary sense into her.

Pearl was leaning against the car door, her face twisted into a hostile glare, her muscles tensing for another fight as he shouted insults, most involving "bitch" and "dyke" and similar epithets. But Greg, belatedly emerging from the hotel and still nursing headaches, responded more to the goon standing in front of her with a tire iron in his hand.

He rushed over just as the man appeared ready to clobber Pearl, then whipped out a can of bear mace and sprayed half the bottle directly into his eyes.

The man yelled in agony and fell writhing to the ground, tire iron clattering to the pavement. Pearl coolly kicked it out of the way and looked back at Greg.

"Come on, Pearl, let's get out of here," he urged, jumping into the passenger's seat.

Pearl still seemed shocked by what just happened, staring at the man twisting on the ground beneath her, but instinctively complied. She entered the car hit the gas pedal and raced into the street, narrowly missing a truck as she turned into traffic.

"Jesus Christ, Greg!" Pearl yelled, ignoring the honks and screams from behind her. "What was that about?"

"Please don't yell, Pearl," Greg groaned, clutching his head again. "Shoulda figured that guy was giving you trouble..."

"You know I'm perfectly capable of defending myself," Pearl huffed, straightening her shirt. "You didn't need to rescue me."

"I know, but...my way was faster."

Pearl harrumphed at this at first, but she couldn't help letting out a snicker as the words sunk in. As a silent gesture of truce, she reached down and turned on the car's air conditioner, even though it made her shoulders cold. She saw the barest ghost of a smile on Greg's face as he rested his head against the door, trying to fall back asleep.

It took about fifteen minutes before Pearl realized that they were headed in the wrong direction.
Just before sunset, after about two hours of tooling aimlessly around northwestern Ohio (and possibly crossing into Michigan at least once), they drove through Sylvania, a small but pleasant suburb. With a day of unpleasantness behind them, they checked into yet another hotel.

"Should we dial Garnet and Amethyst?" Greg wondered as they checked in. "I mean, this is kind of a detour..."

"A frustrating detour," Pearl agreed, feeling frustrated. "Usually I'm a much better driver than this."

"Well, it's Ohio..."

"True." And Pearl sat down and thought, turning on the desk lamp for a moment as Greg unloaded his baggage.

"How is your head, Greg?" Pearl asked.

"Doing better," Greg said. "The worst of it passed, at least. I think when you hit the speed bump it, like, knocked the bump back into place."

"Glad I could help," Pearl responded. "Still, if you need to lie down..."

"I could rest, but...hey, if you have stuff to do..."

"Hmm. Anyway, I don't think we should call them from here. At least not until we've found something. I mean, at some point you have to figure they'll be tracing our telephone..."

"Especially if they were able to call Garnet and Amethyst at their hotel..."

"Exactly. Now you're thinking like a Crystal Gem."

"Great." Greg sighed, falling backwards onto the mattress. "Guess I'll have to get some sword training, too."

Pearl chuckled. "Well, if you're in the mood I'd be happy to show you!"

"Sure, right after my nap."

Another awkward silence.

"I'm not overly hungry, but it does look like it's around dinner time," Pearl said, looking at her watch. "Do you want to eat anything...?"

"I haven't really eaten all day, so...maybe," Greg said. "Just gimme a few minutes to decompress."

Pearl watched as Greg buried his head in a pillow and wondered how long until he fell asleep.

She fished around in her purse, hoping she still had enough money for food (no guarantee of that after their impromptu hoteling spree).

"How about I just order some sandwiches or pizza or something?" Pearl asked. "I saw a sub place driving in here..."

"Sure."

Pearl fished around and found a menu for the restaurant in question, complete with a goofy Italian stereotype flipping a sandwich.
By the time she found it, Greg had fallen asleep. And Pearl decided she really wasn't that hungry.

Pearl walked alone through the streets in twilight, trying to balance her thoughts.

At least her injuries weren't bothering her much today. Too much on her mind, maybe. Even after the fight with the schlub in Toledo, she hadn't experienced any discomfort or pain.

Pearl was glad. She needed to heal. She needed to be whole, or there'd be no chance that she'd survive another round with Aquamarine and Jasper and Topaz.

She still couldn't puzzle out why Topaz had spared her life, especially after she'd just walloped Greg into submission moments earlier. Maybe she was working for someone else, though Pearl didn't have the faintest idea who or why.

Either way, wouldn't that be a laugh? Wheels within fucking wheels, as Lapis might say.

Pearl thought about Lapis, and shuddered to think what state she was in currently. Hoped she was still alive. Prayed that she wouldn't be stubborn and that she'd talk and allow the Gems to help her out.

She felt bad that the two of them, for all they seemed to have in common, hadn't talked or interacted much at all during their time at Beach City. But then Pearl had been in bed pretty much the whole time, and asleep for much of it. And Lapis was usually off enjoying herself with Peridot or listening to music with Amethyst.

Lapis was young, still, for all that she'd been through, and beautiful, and deserved to have fun. Pearl felt that she, herself, didn't.

She'd given up fun the moment Rose died. She needed to inherit her great love's cause and legacy to fight injustice and expose the truth.

Still, Garnet and Amethyst could decompress in their own ways, could enjoy themselves in ways that . Maybe it was the age difference, or maybe...there was something wrong with her.

She knew she hadn't gotten over Rose. She thought about her every minute of every day. And she knew that so many little things she used to enjoy, from reading and writing to music, no longer gave her any pleasure or enjoyment.

She hummed tunelessly as she walked down the street, drawing the attention of passers-by. A slight breeze ruffled her skirt, and she absently clamped it against her leg. She walked past the sub place she'd planned to order from, but didn't care.

I don't need to forget Rose, she scolded herself. I couldn't even if I wanted to. Even if it was healthy.

But I need to make my life work, somehow. I can't define myself purely by her.

I was my own person for a long time. Before Rose. Even while I was with her.

But then I defined myself as an FBI employee. A servant of the government. I can't go back to that.

Then be Pearl White. Be a person Rose would be proud of. Someone worthy of her love and legacy. In everything I do.

She stopped herself in the middle of the sidewalk, struck by this revelation and subconsciously
hugging herself. She looked around her, then up towards the sky, as if hoping to see Rose's face amidst the heavens and the oversized moon.

*There's definitely one thing I need to do,* Pearl thought to herself. And though she felt a lurch of nervous nausea in her gut, she also felt a surge of happiness.

Because everything suddenly made sense.

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Greg woke up when Pearl entered the room, accidentally banging the door against the wall. She carried a bag of takeout food in one hand.

"Oh Greg, I'm so sorry," she sputtered, kicking the door gently shut with her leg.

"No problem," he mumbled, rolling over and looking at the clock on the nightstand. "It's only 7:00, way too early even for me to sleep."

"Well, I have sandwiches at least," Pearl said. "And I had enough money left over to get some Cokes from the vending machine."

"Pearl White, you sure know how to spoil a fella," Greg said, rolling off the bed and onto the floor.

Pearl hesitated, then sat down next to him, and they enjoyed their food on the floor of the hotel room.

She bought Greg a meatball sub and a turkey sandwich for herself. At first they nibbled in silence, then Pearl steeled herself for the confrontation she'd been dreading.

*Here goes nothing.*

"Greg..." she began, unsure what exactly to say. But he was distracted.

"I really hope this soda doesn't explode," Greg muttered as he popped open the Coke can.

"Amethyst isn't here," Pearl said. "You have no reason to expect that."

"Hey, it's just my luck," he said before taking a swig of soda. "So hard to drink this and not think..."

And he left the thought hanging. Pearl decided to bring it up, as delicately as she could.

"So...how long has it been since you've had a drink?"

"Eight months," he said. "Will be nine...next week, I think."

"Hmm. I'm...really proud of you, Greg," she said with a shy smile. "I know it's been hard dealing with...Rose and everything else, so..."

"It's one less thing for me to worry about," Greg said, swigging the rest of the can down in one gulp. Pearl stared at him, then blanched as he belched loudly and grossly.

"Sorry," he said, wiping some soda off his lips and chin. "Some old habits never die."

Pearl winced before continuing.

"Sometimes I wish I had a way of dealing with..." she began. "I mean, not that I want to be an alcoholic or anything like that..."

"You really don't, Pearl. It takes over your life until there's nothing left but your addiction. Nothing
but memories of your last beer and anticipation for the next one. And a lot of pain and blackness in between. That's no way to live."

"I know how addiction works, Greg," Pearl said, more dismissively than she intended.

"Yeah? You think so? Not until it happens to you." Greg tossed his soda can at the garbage bin and missed. "Maybe you think you know, but..."

"Greg, I'm sorry!" she blurted out. Her directness startled them both, but now that the cat was out of the bag she plunged into it.

"Greg...I know what happened to Rose isn't your fault. She just...she kept something from both of us. Think of that. The two people who knew her better than anyone else and we didn't even know she had a problem. How could we have known?"

"I thought about that every day after it happened," Greg admitted. "For weeks. I still do, sometimes. I found her stash, like, two days after she died. She had injectable stuff and pills, too, hidden in a fucking hideaway compartment in her desk."

"Part of me said, you couldn't have done anything, and that's probably true," he said, tears brimming in his eyes. "I mean, she didn't want me to know. And I never would have guessed. She didn't show any of the signs that I thought about...I mean, sometimes she'd be all euphoric and over-the-top in her emotions, but...I dunno, I never saw that as being that different from how she always was."

"Yeah," Pearl agreed quietly.

"But you can't help thinking, wishing there was some way you could change the past."

"You can't," Pearl assured him. And to his surprise, clasped his hand and held it. He didn't seem to know what to do with this development, but accepted it for the moment.

"Anyway...maybe that's why I drank," Greg continued, steadying himself with great difficulty. "Or maybe...I dunno. I was brought up thinking it was stupid to talk about your feelings, that I'm a guy and that emotions are for women or kids or whatever. That whole macho line of bullshit was big in my family. But, I mean, the older I got the less helpful biting down on my feelings seemed to be. But when Rose went...there didn't seem anywhere to go."

"None of your friends helped out?" Pearl asked. She remembered how much support and understanding Garnet and Amethyst gave her. It didn't erase all her feelings, but it helped her cope, made her feel loved, maybe even prevented Pearl from taking her own drastic action in response.

And...she felt more than a little guilty that she hadn't even thought about how Greg might feel. Instead, she blamed him. And no doubt helped drive him to drink.

"They tried, or some of them did. My cousin Andy...you know, he's an asshole in a lot of ways, he's not that different from our friend in Toledo...but he has a good heart, and he really tried to reach out once he heard what happened. Of course, his idea of reaching out involved getting me drunk and trying to hook me up with some of his lady friends...but I appreciated the gesture, I guess. I just kinda felt, there was no way I was going to love anyone again."

Pearl shook her head. She wanted to say something to comfort him, but couldn't form the words. And knew that she had the same feelings.

"And then I thought, well, maybe that's not the healthiest way to look at women, you know? As something to fuck." He winced at his own words and blushed, afraid of Pearl's reaction. "Not that,
you know...I never thought of Rose that way. Not ever. She was gorgeous, but she was something else. But, you know, I was guilty of...me and Marty did some rotten things in our younger days..."

Pearl felt the shame radiating from him, and how hard it was for him to spill his guts.

"All you can do is move on and mature," Pearl said, trying to empathize with Greg. "Which is hard, I know. I'm not one to speak about moving on. But one thing I do know is that...you shouldn't blame people for things they did in the past...as long as they've learned from it."

Pearl and Greg looked at each other until they smiled. Greg started to cry, then looked away and grabbed his sandwich.

Pearl smiled too, taking another bite of her food as Greg struggled to collect himself.

They didn't say anything more about it. At least not then, during their meal. But by that point, they didn't need to.

Pearl threw everything away as neatly as they could. Greg, looking a little relieved by their conversation, went back to the bed and stared at the ceiling.

"Did you bring one of your books along?" Greg asked. "I remember you always had to bring something to read with you everywhere you went."

"As a matter of fact!" Pearl answered, pulling out a slim volume that she'd grabbed from the Beach House.

"Kurt Vonnegut, huh?" Greg said, scanning the cover. "Wouldn't have taken you for a fan."

"Needed something different from my usual," Pearl said, cracking open the cover. "Besides, this one's set in Ohio."

"Ah, I see. Do you mind if I turn the radio on for a few minutes?"

"Sure," Pearl said, leaning back against her pillow as she started to read, using a little slip of torn notebook paper as a bookmark.

Greg turned on a rock station and dialed the volume low, so as not to disturb Pearl.

They might not be close friends now, but they had an understanding, at least. The atmosphere between them seemed much less tense, much more enjoyable, and both seemed content to let their own little worlds occupy the same space.

At least, until a familiar tune came on the air.

"Oh God," Greg moaned, burying his head in the pillow. "I swear I can't get away from this thing!"

Pearl perked up and listened. Sure enough, it was Greg's hit, "Water Witch," playing yet again.

"I'd thought you'd be happy that this song was still playing," Pearl said.

"Yeah, still is the operative word," Greg cried. "This same song! Reminding me that I'm a one-hit wonder and that I'll never sell any albums ever again. Ugh."

"Well...it's something," Pearl assured him. "It's more of a legacy than some of us will have."
"Yeah?" Greg responded skeptically.

"Besides...it's not a completely terrible song," Pearl said, even though she'd grown heartily sick of hearing Rose play it.

Greg laid back and listened to one of his guitar riffs, acting it out on his bed.

"Yeah, I guess it has its strong points," he joked. Though he sighed as the last verse began.

Pearl snapped her book shut. Hesitating just a moment, she put it down and walked over to Greg, who stared dumbfoundedly as she offered him his hand.

"Greg Universe...may I have this dance?"

Greg hesitated, not sure what to say, then smiled and stood up. A grateful smile that broke Pearl's heart.

The two of them embraced and danced slowly across the room, not speaking or making a sound or saying anything. Even as the song ended and "After the Gold Rush" came on the radio, they stayed together, swaying and dancing numbly, just enjoying each other's company.

They had one thing in common that few other people had...they had loved and lost Rose Quartz.

They could reflect on that fact and take comfort in that fact. It wouldn't erase all the past, it wouldn't heal all the scars, but it would make things more bearable.

That night, Pearl was happy. And so was Greg.

And so, both of them thought, was Rose.

Because that night, in that hotel room, they had finally reached an understanding. They might even be friends, now.

And that was enough.
Finished my column for this week early, so here's an unexpected Friday surprise. Tonight's chapter is fairly short (though intense and plot important), but I feel it's as long as it needs to be.

October 8, 1975

Aquamarine sighed warily before entering the basement yet again. She was growing tired of dealing with Lapis, and though her outward demeanor suggested weariness more than concern, a bit concerned. And not a little desperate.

For one, she still struggled to walk without the use of a cane; even the painkillers she'd been taking could only dull the nerves and stiffen her back muscles so much. It mattered to her immensely not to let anyone see her show weakness, even if it was weakness borne of a painful fall that likely would have killed most people.

More importantly, though, she was growing a little frustrated - perhaps even a little unnerved - with their subject.

For such a young woman, Lapis Lazuli was remarkably strong and resilient. She had endured every form of coercion short of actual beatings without flinching or divulging anything. And it was beginning to worry Aquamarine.

Not necessarily because of her strength, in and of itself. Every person, man or woman, young or old, capitalist or communist or fascist, had their breaking point. She had no doubt there was something that could be twisted or pushed in just the right way to demolish her defenses.

Or if all else failed, Aquamarine told herself, they could rip out Lapis's fingernails or hook her up to electrodes and she'd scream bloody murder. Or she could let Jasper have a go at her without supervision...

No, that would be too cruel, even for Aquamarine, considering what Jasper clearly wanted to do to (or with?) her.

Her one consolation was that there wasn't a time limit for Lapis to break. Sure, the other Crystal Gems might still be out there (well, not Pearl, who Aquamarine was confident had died at the beach house), but she didn't particularly care about them any longer. If they got in the way, well, that was on them. And she and Topaz and the rest wouldn't hesitate in shooting them this time.

Either way, Lapis was the last person on the Project DIAMOND list, and the fact that she knew the location of the Jewels was a minor hiccup. She wondered if Lapis was merely stalling for time, knowing that she'd be killed if she was talked. Because clearly there wasn't any hope that she'd come out of this alive.

Aquamarine didn't relish needless cruelty. Admittedly, she contained a strong streak of sadism buried with her resentments, and relished wielding power over others, however ephemeral or fleeting. But
she wasn't cruel for its own sake, merely as a means to an end, a negotiating tactic, a way to ensure compliance. She would just as soon kill Lapis quickly and painlessly as to make her suffer like this.

If not for the Jewels, she would have done so already.

Still, Aquamarine had to wrack her brain for new ways to break Lapis.

"Your, erm, friends tried to bluff us." Aquamarine produced a sheaf of papers and let Lapis look them over.

"Claimed they had the Jewels themselves," she said disdainfully, marveling at their silliness. "We almost believed them, until they sent us their evidence. Now, I don't know about you, but expense reports and budget memos aren't the sort of classified documents that we'd kill to keep hidden. Would you?"

Lapis didn't say anything, or visibly react. Though she felt a stab of humor - the first she'd felt in days - thinking about Garnet and Amethyst and Peridot (*her* Peridot, of all people!) trying to outwit Aquamarine with trash.

"I don't know if they'll be stupid enough to try and locate you here," Aquamarine said smugly. "That obviously wouldn't work! But...perhaps they have other ways of locating the Jewels. Perhaps...they already know where they are."

Lapis didn't react to this, though she remembered the letter she'd written for Peridot. After the phone calls they'd exchange, she was sure they'd found it. Though she also wondered how much help it could really be. Peridot and the others were resourceful and determined, but they weren't going to turn over the entire state of Ohio looking for a bundle of papers.

Or were they?

"What happens if you *don't* find the Jewels?" Lapis asked, more from curiosity than concern.

Aquamarine reacted as if the thought hadn't occurred to her.

"That's for us to worry about, dear," she said, smiling broadly. "If we don't find them, of course, your time on Earth can be terminated at any moment."

"Then what's my incentive to talk?" Lapis snapped. "If I tell you where they are, you'll kill me. If I don't tell you, you'll kill me, just more slowly. Either way, I'm dead. I'm not convinced there's any way for me to win, here."

She looked up and fixed Aquamarine with a deadly stare and a savage smirk.

"You don't honestly think you could try anything else make me talk...*do* you?"

The challenge hit Aquamarine like a slap. She felt a swell of fury which she struggled to suppress; the corners of her mouth twitched, ever so slightly, allowing Lapis to know that she'd made a dent.

"Oh Lapis," Aquamarine said, regaining her usual poise. "So confident in yourself. Well, let's try this."

Aquamarine produced a small pistol and aimed it at Lapis's head. The suddenness of this did unnerve Lapis, who winced and started to tremble ever so slightly, though she struggled not to show it.
"Now, my dear, it's not rocket science," Aquamarine said as she walked around Lapis in circles, keeping the gun aimed at her head. "Human beings are funny things. They might know a situation is hopeless, as you do now, but there's always some incentive for them to stay alive just a bit longer. Maybe it's hope for friends or family or someone else who might be adversely affected. Maybe it's a dim hope of things somehow changing for the better. Or maybe it's just the dim, pathetic human instinct for survival, knowing that being alive for another ten minutes, even in agony, even without hope, is better than instant death.

"So *I* don't need a reason to keep you alive," Aquamarine said, now standing behind Lapis, with her gun resting behind her right ear. "That reason is yours. You know there's something that you want from me. Or you would have talked by now. Think carefully..."

Lapis could almost feel Aquamarine tensing her finger on the gun's trigger. She closed her eyes, waiting for the bullet to come.

Click.

Nothing happened.

Lapis just opened her eyes and blinked, trying to process what had happened. Then figuring that Aquamarine had tried out the oldest bluff in the book.

"Oh dear..." Aquamarine said, examining her gun. "Did I forget to load it again?" She fiddled with the chamber and manually ejected a shell.

"No, it was just jammed!"

And she fired four quick shots into the floor to prove it. The gun's roar was deafening in the closed basement, and the display had its desired effect on Lapis, whose shoulders and chest trembled, her breaths ragged and her heart racing. Her defiant glower transmogrified into a look of numb terror. Aquamarine waited a moment until the ringing in her ears subsided. She relished Lapis's upset, and leaned in close, brushing away a strand of her hair.

"Now we understand each other," she said directly into Lapis's ear, her voice dripping satisfaction and contempt. "Now, I will make you a deal, for what it's worth. Getting you to tell us something would be an achievement at this point. But, it wouldn't necessarily be the end. Not if you gave us the wrong location or if we couldn't find it. Not if the Jewels were missing and you'd stashed them somewhere else. Perhaps most of all, not if there's some detail you're forgetting to share: a combination to a safe, perhaps, or which pumpkin you're hiding the Jewels in.

"So, think on this, Lazuli. I could leave you here at the tender mercies of Jasper while I collect the documents, then send a signal to her once I found it. And then, let come what may. Or, I could have you come along to verify everything yourself. That way, you'll have a few more days to think about how you're going to die."

Ordinarily, Lapis might have ignored this offer, or even responded with sarcasm. But she was too shaken to challenge Aquamarine. And her invoking Jasper, with her death wish and warped ideas of revenge and fate and whatever she'd been yammering about, sapped whatever resistance she might have had.

Still, she mulled over the offer as carefully as her state of mind allowed.

Trusting Aquamarine at all would be a calculated risk. Lapis had only one card to play, and it clearly
wouldn't save her for too much longer. Aquamarine could renege, take Lapis's information and leave her alone with Jasper anyway. She could tell her and be shot to death immediately afterwards. Aquamarine clearly wasn't stupid, and even taking Lapis out of the room would increase the possibility of escape, or rescue by the Gems, or any of a million scenarios that could drastically change things.

Which might even be part of her plan. To try and get Lapis to open up, to entertain the false hope of survival, only to have it cruelly slammed shut. And, since they were in contact with Peridot and the Gems, they might even trick them into a rescue attempt which was likely to end only one way.

That did seem like something this bitch would do, Lapis thought.

Wheels within fucking wheels.

Before the other day, Lapis might well have been resigned to dying, to telling Aquamarine to go fuck herself and put her out of her misery.

Now, after Peridot, after her silent vow the other day to survive, no matter what...who knows?

She tried thinking back to her happy little fantasy of the two of them living and loving together. Wondering if there was now even a dim possibility that it might come true. That she could make it come true.

Part of her knew that this was the exact thing Aquamarine wanted her to think. But another part didn't care.

If there was even a little chance that she could see Peridot again, that she could escape this wretched life and live like a normal, happy person, it was worth the risk.

"Okay," she muttered. "I'll tell you what I know...On one condition."

"Name it."

"Just...don't hurt my friends. Leave the Crystal Gems alone." She wanted to add Peridot to the list, but felt that might be too tempting. Because as far as Aquamarine knew, Peridot was still an unwitting accomplice.

"Fine," Aquamarine said, flatly. Her lack of enthusiasm or her usual arrogant cheerfulness convinced Lapis of her sincerity.

And Aquamarine wasn't being insincere, exactly. She didn't give a damn about the Gems, now that Pearl White was out of the picture. If they left her alone, fine by her. If they insisted on interfering, well, that was their problem.

Still, she considered this a victory. At least for now. She'd deal with any unforeseen risks or circumstances as they came.

And so she carefully put the gun down on the floor and sat down next to Lapis, preparing to hear her out.
October 9, 1975

Outside Sylvania, OH

The first thing Pearl noticed, besides the rain clouds billowing overhead, was how *dead* the farm seemed.

The barn itself wasn't particularly big - probably about 30 feet by 20, just enough for a tractor or two and maybe some livestock, though the previous owner evidently hadn't raised any animals. There was a small silo attached, visibly worn and rusted. The little house had windows that were alternately smashed or boarded up. Around the property were large fields of wheat and other vegetables that lay fallow, dead, dirty stalks covered in mud and devoured by weeds.

"How did Lapis even *find* this place?" Pearl asked, surveying everything from the small rise where they'd parked the van.

"Well, it's the only big farmhouse for miles around here," Greg responded. "Can't have been too hard to find."

"Hmm. Well, she is a resourceful girl," Pearl said with a motherly tone of approval. She tossed back the bottom of her coat, flickering in the wind, so the hilt of her sword was within easy reach.

The two of them walked down, examining the dead fields and dilapidated buildings. They entered the barn, noticing that aside from some random junk - some paint cans and farm tools and an economy-sized bag or two of fertilizer - it was completely empty.

"Looks like someone got here first," Greg said, gesturing to the

"Well, I doubt it's in here," Pearl said, looking around the floor of the barn. "Unless Lapis buried it somewhere under the floor..."

"Nah, looks like mostly gravel," Greg said, kicking a pebble off the ground to demonstrate. "Not easy to dig this stuff out."

"Hmm. Well, one location ruled out. But where could she have hidden it?"

They went into the silo and found it equally empty. Then into the house, which, like the barn, bore signs of plunder.

Windows had been shattered with rocks and blunt instruments. Muddy footprints, broken glass and water stains splashed across the floor. Cupboards and cabinets were open, chairs rotting where they sit, a table overturned. There were food and other supplies spilled on the floor, along with mold and mouse feces.
Pearl practically gagged at the smell as they moved through the kitchen, then into the living room. Which was slightly better - it was the heavy, dull smell of damp mud and straw, not quite rodent shit - but not much.

Pearl absently looked around the living room, opening a chest. There were some books inside, now musty and nibbled by silverfish.

"Now, Lapis wouldn't have just stuck something this important somewhere it would be easy to find, would she?" Pearl said, opening one of the books and wincing at the watery smell.

"That would be counter-intuitive," Greg agreed, opening an empty cabinet and giving it a cursory look. "Then again, she might have left a clue or a key somewhere to let us know..."

"True," Pearl said as she instinctively peeled back the dog-eared corner of a page. "But that wouldn't necessarily help us."

"Guess you're right," Greg said, looking around the floor for signs of a trapdoor or a hiding space or something that wasn't obvious.

"It could be something - a word, a phrase, a book, I dunno - that would have significance to her and that the rest of us wouldn't notice or care about..."

"That's assuming that she'd want to find it again anyway," Greg said. "I mean, this isn't pirate treasure, Pearl..."

"True, but she might have wanted them for leverage in case...something like this happened."

Somehow it didn't occur to Pearl that for just about anyone but them, what they were experiencing was, precisely, the worst-case scenario. And she thought again of Lapis, knowing that the papers might be the only thing standing between her.

She forced the thought of her mind and grabbed another book off the shelf. An old farmer's book about raising pigs.

Greg looked at a portrait of a gray-haired, heavy-set man with an eccentric mustache hanging on the wall.

"Think this might be the Llewelyn dude?" Greg asked, trying to take it off the wall.

"Could be," Pearl asked absently. "Or a family member."

Greg lifted the painting away from the wall. And his goggled as he spotted the back.

"Pearl, take a look at this!"

Pearl put down the book she'd been perusing and joined Greg as he took a pocket knife and carved out the back of the portrait.

To their surprise, a yellowed, folded piece of paper came tumbling out.

Pearl and Greg exchanged a significant look, then unfolded the paper.

It was a letter, written in neat handwriting and nauseating prose.

"Dear Llewelyn,
"It has been too long since we've spoken, F'anwylyd. Too long since I've seen your beautiful eyes and gorgeous skin and heard your melodic voice dripping with sweet loveliness with each consonant and every vowel..."

As the letter went on, it became apparent that it wasn't anything more than a mash note between lovers.

And a very badly written, absurdly florid, sickeningly sweet one at that. (The occasional lapses into Welsh didn't help.) No wonder he'd hidden it away!

"Well, that was a bust," Pearl sighed with audible irritation, tearing herself away from the letter and stalking to the other side of the room. She balled her hand into a fist and rested it on her chin, trying to think of somewhere, or something obvious that they'd missed.

As she did, a thunderclap echoed outside.

The rain came down hard for several long minutes. The room became dark, illuminated by the occasional lightning flash. Pearl sat silently in a chair listening to the rain, having taken off her scabbard and rested it against a bookshelf. Greg sat at a nearby table humming and tapping his fingers on the wood.

"Greg, could you please?" Pearl snapped, unable to stand it after awhile.

"Sorry, I hum when I think," he apologized. He folded his hands in an effort to keep from making noise, but they fidgeted and strained against each other as he did, rocking back and forth.

Pearl let out a long, disappointed sigh. She bolted out of her seat and walked across the room.

"This whole thing is pointless if we don't even know what we're looking for!" Pearl yelled, smashing her fist against a cabinet. "There's got to be something...I mean, we can't spend time digging out every nook and cranny. And if Lapis talks, Aquamarine and Jasper turn up before we find it..."

"Pearl, keep cool, all right?" Greg said, though by now he was fidgeting that a smoker without his cigarettes. "It's gotta be here somewhere. And if it is, we'll find it. Don't worry."

This didn't comfort Pearl much. And she sighed, and said:

"I wish Garnet and Amethyst were here."

"Well, we could use all the help we could get," Greg agreed.

Another thunderclap. Pearl couldn't take it any more.

"I need to use the ladies' room," Pearl said. "If I can find it..."

She stepped out of the room into the dim hallway, trying to navigate the shadows. She found what looked like a dark closet, and saw a light chain overhead. She instinctively pulled it, before realizing that duh, of course, there wouldn't be electricity (or running water, for that matter) in a place no one's lived in for years.

She didn't really need to go, and was worried about just what she might find in the toilet of an unoccupied house, anyway. Mostly, she just wanted to be alone.
A lightning flash illuminated the room for a moment. The glimpse Pearl received indicated it wasn't a bathroom at all, but a small storage closet.

*Well, of course,* Pearl chastised herself. *A farm this old would probably have an outhouse.*

Pearl cringed a bit, fearing what creepy crawlies might occupy such a closed space. She took a moment to collect herself, a deep breath of comparatively fresh air, then haltingly stepped inside. Her nose was already used to the mustiness, but there was a loud dripping noise that unnerved her more. A deep sense of loneliness and abandon.

And *then* she felt something skitter across her ankle.

She screamed and jumped, knocking something over behind her. She looked down and saw it for the briefest of seconds.

It looked like an old book, or an album of some kind.

She started to pick it up when she saw a photograph spill out of it. And picked it up instinctively, taking it out into the hall where the light was a little better.

In the picture was a simple scene of two teenage girls in sporty college outfits. One olive-skinned and black-haired, the other a pale redhead. Both standing before a lake or a pond, smiling awkwardly, the redhead's hand on the brunette's shoulder.

Pearl was about to discard it when, belatedly, her mind registered something familiar about the photograph. It took her a moment, then she clued in on the dark-haired girl on the left. Something about her seemed...

*Lapis.*

It was Lapis.

"Holy *shit,*" Pearl muttered out loud.

"She *was* here," Pearl said to Greg, who examined the photograph carefully. "So at least we know we're in the right place."

"Boy, Lapis looks so...*happy* here," Greg said, a wistful tone in his voice. "Guess the world hasn't been kind to her."

"Hmm..." Pearl thought about that, felt a twinge of sadness and another grim thought about where Lapis was now, and what was almost surely happening to her...

"Still, a photograph doesn't give us much to go on, in and of itself," Pearl said. "This was basically an accident, not something we were meant to find."

"I'm not sure about that, Pearl," Greg replied. "Maybe there's a clue here."

"Oh, come on Greg," Pearl sputtered. "Where would it be, exactly? Written tiny in the *leaves* maybe?"

"No, written on the back," Greg said. He turned it over, and he and Pearl spotted an inscription written in faded ink.

"*Lapis,*
"Thought you'd want a copy of the picture we took up near Acton Lake during fall break! So much fun. Look forward to seeing you back at school! XXXOOXX

"Love,

"Cat."

"Jesus, that's a downer," Greg said. Pearl just stared at the inscription, reading it again and again, as if scanning it for a clue.

"I wonder whatever happened to this Cat person," Greg mused. "Maybe she would know what to look for..."

"I think it's simpler than that, Greg," Pearl said, her face scrunched into a proud smirk. "Look!"

In the upper right hand corner, written in small, tight handwriting that was fresher (and neater) than Catherine's shorthand: HISS.

"Oh, come on! Cryptography?" Greg moaned. "I'm not good at riddles, Pearl. Hiss. What does that even mean?"

"That's what we need to find out," Pearl asserted as she studied the photograph.

"...A snake?" Greg suggested weakly.

"I don't think a snake has anything to do with this," Pearl lectured.

"Well, what else hisses? A cat?"

"Hmm. Well, this girl was calling herself cat."

"So it could be an in-joke that we're not privy too."

"Sure." Pearl thought about this, though that explanation didn't make much sense to her. Then she realized it would only have to make sense to Lapis.

"What else could it mean?" Greg complained, his voice taking on a shrill, almost whining tone.

"Something that we should be able to figure out," Pearl insisted.

Though for the life of her, her mind couldn't make sense of it either.

She sat down, looking for some kind of writing implement. Fortunately, she had a loose pen in her coat pocket, and started scribbling possible explanations on the paper.

Outside, the rain sputtered to a stop.

The sound of car wheels rolling on gravel interrupted Pearl's reverie.

She'd just ruled out, for the fifth time, the possibility of a lizard-based explanation for the word hiss when she saw Greg staring out the window.

"Company," he muttered. His eyes betrayed fear.

Pearl put down the post card and drew her sword from the scabbard, positioning it against her
"Greg, are you armed?" she asked as she moved over to the window.

"I, um, have that bear mace," he offered.

"Get it."

Pearl's tone and facial expression took on the steely glare that meant trouble. Greg complied, frantically looking for his jacket.

Pearl stared, long and hard, at the car until she finally recognized the tall black woman stepping out of the passenger's seat.

"Oh, thank God," Pearl muttered, steel replaced with a smile, as she rushed to open the door. Greg stared in surprise, fumbling with the bottle of mace.

"It took us about nine hours to reach Toledo, and another two hours to figure out where the hell you were!" Amethyst suggested, giving Pearl a crushing bear hug. The light flowed into the room from the opened door.

"Well, you never were the best driver," Pearl chided.

"Aww, and we were having such a nice moment here!" Amethyst groaned, before tweaking Pearl's nose.

Garnet was leaning in the door frame, looking up at the sky with a contented smile on her face. And the now-familiar sound of Peridot's voice explained why.

"Wow, a rainbow! Oh my stars, two rainbows! Twin rainbows! How often do you see...? Pearl, Amethyst, Greg, come take a look!"

Pearl and Amethyst obliged, with Greg following a little more cautiously. Gratefully breathed in the fresh air, though it hung thick with humidity.

Sure enough, they saw two beams of prismatic light penetrating the horizon, with the sky mottled into painterly shades of blue and purple. One rainbow was solid and clear, the other hazy and smudged, flickering in and out of the light spectrum. But both were beautiful.

In the far distance, another lightning bolt flashed. Too far away to make thunder, just enough to add a fresh note of eerie splendor.

A slight breeze ruffled Pearl's hair as she looked skyward. But that couldn't detract from the simple beauty of the sight. Or the happiness of being reunited.

They were all here. They were finally together again.

*Nothing can stop us now,* Pearl assured herself. *We'll figure this out and finally, this nightmare will come to an end.*

Then a sad thought hit her:

*Not quite.*

*We're all here...*
"Things are terribly wrong with this country these days. I tell ya ma'am, these days you have Congress investigating things that should be left buried and alone, all so they can look good on TV. You have young people with their drugs and their sex and their complete lack of morals or backbone. You have the blacks carrying on, and now the women - pardon me, not real women like you, ma'am, I mean those damn hairy-legged lesbian Women's Lib feminist types - and the queers are getting in on it, too. Everybody's voice must be heard, at all costs! Next the animals will be lining up demanding the right to vote!

"Heh, you should have seen it, sweetheart! Just the other day some woman beat the shit out of me..."

"Where did that happen?"

"I was staying at a hotel in town when I had a run-in with this lady. Really tall broad, quite the bombshell. Started talking to her about politics and then she flipped out and attacked me."

"And you let her?"

"Hey, I'm an old-fashioned guy, whatever you might think. I don't hit women. Of course, I've never had to until now. Until these ladies decided to stop shaving their legs and all that garbage. Of course, that damn Betty Ford isn't helping..."

"Okay, tell me about this woman. She must have been something if she could beat up a tough guy like you. You said she was tall?"

"Oh yeah, she was at least an inch taller than me. You don't see that much in and of itself. She had a really nice skin-tone, too."

"Her hair?"

"Short and wavy, kinda reddish-blonde, what do you call that? Strawberry or something."

"Did you catch her name, by any chance?"

"I didn't. But she was definitely an Eastern type. Had one of those snootier-than-thou voices that suggests they only interact with people like when they want you to clean their boots. Probably a dyke, too, if you think about it."

"Yeah, probably. Hey, do you mind if I step out for a second and make a phone call?"

"Sure. I'll be waiting."

"Better have another gin-and-tonic waiting, too."

"You bet."

"Yeah, I'm up in Toledo. Figured this couldn't wait. I just talked to a real redneck up here who told me that he got his ass kicked by a tall woman with strawberry hair. Ring any bells?"

"...Hmm. So Pearl White is alive..."

"...Yeah."
"And here I thought you'd killed her."

"...I thought I had, too."

"Hard to believe you missed with, what was it? Four shots at point blank range."

"She, erm, must be really good at playing dead."

"Must be...Topaz, you wouldn't be lying to me, now would you?"

"I would never lie to you, Aquamarine. I mean, if I was hiding something, would I have even called you in the first place?"

"Sometimes I don't have any idea of what goes through your mind, Topaz. You government bureaucrats can be so sentimental...especially when you worked for the same department."

"I didn't even know Pearl White worked for the FBI until you told me..."

"Well, now you do, and I'm sure it's not a pleasant thing for you to consider. Not pleasant for me, either, really, to think about how many people I used to work with were on this list. But you know what, Topaz? I swallowed it all and did it anyway. Because it's my job. Because there are things more important in this world than what I'm feeling at a given moment. Do you understand?"

"I...Yes."

"Good. I'll be up there with Jasper and Lazuli by nightfall. Do you know where they are now?"

"Guy I talked to said they were looking for some kinda farmhouse...Which seems to match what Lazuli told you."

"Hmm. Well, she didn't know exactly where the farmhouse was located...but it shouldn't be hard to find. Anyway. Sit tight and wait for us. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The phone hung up, leaving Topaz with a thousand worries and a million doubts.

Chapter End Notes

As we near this story's home stretch (expect somewhere between 45-50 chapters total), it's time to start thinking about the future. To that end, a couple of thoughts:

1. In a previous chapter, I mentioned that I was considering rewriting this fic as an original story/novel once it's completed. At this point I'm pretty committed to that idea, though I realize it will take some time to revise it before it's ready for publication. Anyone here who'd be interested in reading (and helping polish) a revised draft before I publish can let me know, and I should be able to arrange something.

2. That said, I'd still want to work on something original while revising this, so I'm already planning a follow-up story. I thought about a direct sequel but couldn't think of a really good plot, so I might try another historical AU instead. Not committed to anything yet, but lately I've been reading a lot about the post-WWII Red Scare, so that appears
most likely...though it might be even harder to stick Steven Universe's characters into the late '40s than the era of Nixon and Frank Church. We'll see.

As always, I appreciate everyone who takes the time to read this story, and especially those leaving kudos and comments. You all help to make writing fun and worthwhile!
October 9, 1975

Sometimes, something as simple as the beauty of a dual rainbow can brighten up an awful day.

Or, reuniting with friends and allies you feared dead or worse.

Or, the anticipation of an astounding discovery.

Any, or all of which might explain why Peridot, despite the long, cramped car ride from DC with Garnet and Amethyst, and her fear for Lapis, and the ever-present feeling of dread crushing her stomach into a ball, seemed in a euphoric mood. It was something that the dank smell and ruined interior of the farmhouse couldn't dissolve, nor the baffling puzzle Pearl and Greg offered them.

If anything, she relished being able to use her mind to solve a riddle once again.

"Hiss. Hiss. **Hissssssssssssssssssss.**"

She drew out the last syllable like a pissed-off snake, pacing around the room much as Pearl had done a short while ago. Both of which amused and irritated her colleagues.

"Lapis hasn't been particularly forthcoming about her past, but this degree of deception appears...I don't know, out of character for her. She's more about vagueness than sophisticated cryptography. Unless she's more sophisticated than I anticipated."

"Well, I don't think any of us...really know Lapis that well," Amethyst said gently, drawing close. "Or...at all, really...I mean, even **you've** only known her a couple of weeks..."

She winced at her own words, thinking that she'd upset Peridot or minimize the feelings she and Lapis had developed for each other.

Thankfully, Peridot just nodded in acknowledgment, then continued her pacing, muttering vaguely coherent syllables to herself as she sorted through random thoughts and ideas.

Peridot scanned through memories of her conversations with Lapis for any hint of what that word might mean.

**Hiss.**

A pun? An inside joke? A bad experience referenced in code? An acrostic or mnemonic? An esoteric reference that only Lapis would know?

It didn't make sense on its face. There had to be **something** there.

What the **fuck**, Lapis?

"Maybe there's merit in your Cat-based assumption," she said to Greg. "But then we'd have to know who this Cat person was, and where she is, and what it means..."

"Did Lapis ever mention a...Cat to you?" Pearl asked. She, too, was reluctant to mention someone
who'd clearly meant a lot to Lapis.

"No, she didn't," Peridot admitted as the photo's import sunk in.

That this was somebody she had loved before meeting Peridot. So of course she might use her name as a code or a password.

But she couldn't resent a woman she'd never met and only knew through a long-ago photograph. Well, she easily could, but now wasn't the time for that.

This was too important.

"Well, we did find something hidden in a picture frame," Greg admitted, gesturing to the letter from earlier. "But it wasn't, ah, what we were looking for."

Amethyst picked up the Llewelyn letter and cracked up as she started reading it.

"Ha! You guys, even if we don't finding anything here, this was worth the trip!"

"I'm glad you find that so amusing, Amethyst," Pearl huffed.

"You bet I do! I mean, it's written like the world's worst soap opera. "I eagerly await the warm embrace of your rugged manly arms and hairy chest, woolen like the finest highland sheep..." Bahahahaha!"

"Mr. Llewelyn's lover certainly had a colorful way of expressing herself," Pearl admitted.

"And that's not even getting to the foreign language parts. I mean, what language is this, even, with all the Ys and weird-ass consonants? Vampire?"

"It's Welsh, Amethyst."

"Same diff."

"Most vampires are from Eastern Europe, Amethyst, not the British Isles."

"...Pearl, 'most vampires' aren't real..."

"You know what I mean..."

As they argued, recapturing some of their old banter, Peridot dimly remembered an early conversation she'd had with Lapis. About how she read Leon Uris novels and found them boring.

Maybe that had some significance.

But Uris usually wrote historical fiction and legal dramas, Peridot thought. How does that help us?

She absently wandered over to the bookshelf, deep in thought, and surveyed some of the titles on display there.

The ones she could read were mostly books about farming, with a few history titles randomly strewn in as well. The Guns of August...Animal Husbandry in the Midwest...Sheep and You...The Reivers by Faulkner...A Gentleman's Guide to Wheat Cultivation...The Unfinished Story of Alger Hiss...

It took a moment for Peridot to realize the title she'd just read.
Hiss? Alger Hiss? The Soviet spy?

Yes!

The wheels of Peridot's multitudinous mind creaked into gear, sparking connections and coincidences.

Wait a minute...Leon Uris.

Leon Uris wrote *Topaz*. Which was a spy novel. And a lousy Hitchcock movie.

(And, apparently, one of the women who had kidnapped Lapis at the beach house. Small world, indeed!)

There's your connection, Peridot. *Spies*.

But that seemed too neat of a coincidence.

But, **Hiss**. What the fuck else could it mean?

Not a cat. Not a Cat, either, evidently (which, strangely, relieved Peridot).

Probably not a snake, unless Lapis had dated some weird chick named Cobra or Cottonmouth.

As her friends chatted in the background, Peridot grabbed the book off the shelf and opened it, scanning frantically for clues. She was too young to have experienced it first hand, but she did have dim memories of reading about the case over the years, about Whittaker Chambers and the Prothonotary Warbler and the secret typewriter and something about microfilm files hidden in a pumpkin patch...

Of course.

*Pumpkins. Farm.*

**That** had to be it.

"You guys," she muttered, interrupting another exchange between Pearl and Amethyst. She held up the book so that everyone could read the cover.

Pearl stared at it in incredulity. "Alger Hiss? What on Earth would he have to do...?"

Garnet got it first. "*Pumpkins. Pumpkin Papers.*"

"Oh, right," Greg recalled. "Dude had incriminating microfilm in pumpkins or something. Remember watching the hearings in newsreels and stuff. That whole mess is how we got Nixon."

"But there wouldn't *be* any pumpkins here, would there?" Pearl pointed out. "All the vegetation and crops we saw outside was rotting...except for the weeds, I suppose."

"Yeah," Greg added. "I mean, even if Lapis hid papers inside a pumpkin like Chambers did, the pumpkin would have rotted a long time ago."

"Maybe," Peridot admitted, though she wasn't about to let this discovery go.

It *had* to make sense. Had to.
"What else could it mean, though?" she vocalized, suddenly thrilled. "Alger Hiss...spy. Lapis...a spy. Or an informant. Or...whatever. Same difference for our purposes. Of course they're the same! Of course she'd make the connection and figure that we would be smart enough to figure it out. It's so obvious."

"Uhh P, maybe it wasn't *that* obvious," Amethyst protested, a little embarrassed that she didn't really know what they were talking about. Garnet shushed her with a raised hand, allowing Peridot to have her moment.

"That's why it's so brilliant!" Peridot continued, proud of her beloved Lazuli for being so clever, and still proud of herself for figuring it out. "It would be so *obvious* for any student of spycraft that no one would even think to look in a pumpkin. Practically hiding it in plain sight!"

She sighed and clutched the book to her chest.

"Great. But, like, where is *this* Pumpkin?" Amethyst asked.

Peridot opened her eyes and looked at her, blinking heavily.

With her excitement punctured, she realized that she had no idea where to even *start*.

At least, since they were on a farm, she expected that it referenced to an actual, literal pumpkin. Another metaphor might be too hard to untangle.

It only took about fifteen minutes' searching through the dead corn and ruined wheat until they found a pumpkin patch. Of course, most of the pumpkins were long dead, either rotted on the vine or devoured by animals.

"Well, it doesn't look like *this* will get us anywhere," Pearl said, poking disgustedly with her foot at a brown, gloppy mess that had once been a pumpkin.

Amethyst, for her part, seemed to enjoy smashing the pumpkin remains with her feet. "Nope, no papers here!" she crowed. "Lots of mess, though..."

"A mess that you're going to clean up," Pearl chided.

"Don't worry P, I'll wash my shoes off before I soil your precious, precious rug."

Greg picked up a gourd that seemed relatively intact, if miscolored. And looked through a hole a parasite had bored in the side.

Peridot kicked over a small blob of pumpkin glop and stared at the resulting mess. A small creature, possibly a centipede, darted out, spooking her.

Greg dropped the pumpkin he'd been holding and it splattered on the ground. Nothing inside but seeds and disgusting mush.

"Well, this looks like a bust," Greg said, wiping his hands off on his pants. "Nothing alive here for a long time. Except bugs and weeds."

"Well, Lapis said this all happened, what, at least two years ago," Pearl reminded everyone. "Not like we should have expected a thriving plantation or anything..."

"Guess it was worth a try," Amethyst said, still squishing her shoes in mud and pumpkin mess as
Pearl winced, Greg grinned and Garnet shook her head.

"Hmm. No, there must be *something* here," Peridot insisted, though her tone seemed empty and defeated and uncertain.

"You tried, Perry," Amethyst assured her. "Not a bad guess. But hey, sometimes coincidences are just coincidences, you know? Lapis probably just burned it or something."

"That does seem like her," Garnet agreed.

Peridot harrumphed and crossed her arms.

Then she noticed something small sticking out of the ground.

She bent down, pushing aside a few scraggly weeds, and pulled it out.

To her surprise, it was a pumpkin.

Not an old one. Not a dead one.

A tiny, freshly-grown pumpkin, a little larger than Peridot's fist. It was light yellow, almost white, and much lighter in weight than it looked.

"My word," she muttered, admiring the little vegetable in her hands. "It's beautiful."

She didn't know why it meant so much to her, just then. A little white pumpkin. But it did.

The others gathered around to see it, either politely surprised or bored.

"Huh. Guess you were wrong, Greg," Amethyst said, watching Peridot fondle the leaves and hold it close, admiring the gourd's earthy scent.

"Well, it's...a nice vegetable," Pearl interrupted uncertainly. "But, Peridot, it looks freshly grown. Can't imagine Lapis would have been able to plant it..."

Peridot didn't care. She tore at the vine connecting it to the ground in an effort to free it from the Earth.

"Perry, come on," Amethyst said. "It's just a pumpkin."

"Okay, but it's *my* pumpkin," Peridot insisted as she strained and pulled at the vine. "Might as well have a souvenir of this place if..."

As she pulled, she noticed something peculiar.

She noticed that the vine sifted a large clump of dirt beneath it. And that there seemed to be something underneath the soil.

Intrigued, she stopped and watched the dirt settle back down where it had been.

"Well, there are other places we could start looking..." Pearl said to the rest of the Gems, oblivious.

Then Peridot pulled it again, and kicked up a small geyser of dirt. This time they *did* notice.

"Whoa, did you see that?" Amethyst asked, peering closer.
"Yes, the vine ejected some dirt as Peridot pulled on it," Pearl said dismissively. "Now, I suggest..."

"No, P, I mean...look. Perry, pull it again."

Peridot nodded and pulled with all her might.

The vine left a large patch of dirt off the ground, again. Not just loose soil but solid clumps. It looked like it was buried or arranged over something...heavy underneath.

"That's too much leverage for one pumpkin that size," Garnet observed.

"All right, should we dig or pull?" Amethyst asked.

"I think I saw some old shovels in the barn," Greg offered.

But Peridot pulled again, using all the strength in her tiny body.

This time, she fell backwards. The vine and pumpkin seemed to tear as she toppled over, and she heard a loud snap!

The vine had broken! But Peridot clearly had pulled hard enough to tear loose the soil and reveal something underneath.

Amethyst had bent down and started sifting the remaining clumps of dirt away from the field with her hands. Pearl, Garnet and Greg stood over her fretfully.

"You just gonna let me dig by myself, guys? Real cool."

Pearl blanched, unnerved at the sight of all that dirt. Garnet removed her shotgun from her coat and placed it on the ground a few inches away, startling Greg. Then she bent down next to Amethyst and joined her.

Peridot placed the pumpkin on the ground and hurried over to help. After a moment, Greg and Pearl joined in, the latter sifting the dirt most daintily, as if trying her damndest not to get dirt under her nails.

After a minute or so of digging, they'd turned up enough loose soil to find something, buried about a foot under the ground.

A small, unmarked wooden produce crate, about 24 by 18 inches.

"Doesn't look like it has any handles!" Amethyst said, wiping sweat off her forehead and smearing dirt there instead. "Looks like Lappy didn't want to make it easy for us."

"I think that's the idea behind burying it underground," Garnet commented wryly.

They dug a little more around the edges until just enough was exposed for them to pull it out. Fortunately, it wasn't overly heavy.

"Man, this looks sealed up," Amethyst said, inspecting it. "She really didn't want anyone getting in here."

"I don't see a lid or anything we can use to easily open it," Pearl said. "Greg, maybe we can make use of those tools you mention..."

She was interrupted by a large banging sound as Garnet kicked the box, hard, until one of the side
panels clattered to the Earth.

"Sometimes violence is the answer," she said wryly to a dumbfounded Pearl.

Peridot stumbled forward and reached inside. There was a large sheaf of papers wrapped in onion skin.

Trembling, she pulled it out, almost afraid to see it.

She carefully unwrapped the onion skin. Looked inside.

The first page was a bland, affectless cover sheet with the phrase **EYES ONLY** stamped on top. She shuffled it somewhere into the middle of the pile, eager for something more exciting.

"Holy shit, you guys," she mumbled, unable to hide her astonishment and fear. For once, she was at a loss for words.

"Is it...the Jewels?" Pearl asked, disbelieving what was happening.

Peridot didn't say anything. Instead, she looked down at the second page and scanned the first few lines:

"16 MAY 1973

"MEMORANDUM FOR: Executive Secretary,

"CIA Management Committee

"SUBJECT: "Family Jewels"

"1. The purpose of this memorandum is to forward for your personal review summaries of activities conducted either by or under the sponsorship of the Office of Security in the past which in my opinion conflict with the provisions of the National Security Act of 1947..."

It was too much to process at once. Peridot fainted before she could read any further.

Chapter End Notes

The Family Jewels (or what's been declassified of them, anyway) can be found online here for the curious: https://tinyurl.com/y7x727cx
From the moment they left the safe house, Lapis knew that her life was counting down.

She could only guess how long it would take them to reach Ohio. Probably six, seven hours, maybe a little more. And, if she was lucky, she would live the night until they found the farm house and the papers.

After that...who knows?

At first, she was convinced Aquamarine would wait until they were a short ways from the safe house and kill her there. Leaving her body in the woods somewhere in Virginia or Maryland, where her death could be chalked up to drugs or suicide or something else unseemly. A minor tragedy to be wondered at, but not investigated by anyone.

As the car drove on, as she stared at the endless expanses of countryside and highways and occasional blobs of suburban sprawl, she tried to fight down her feeling of despair. Tried to remember that she had something - or someone, at any rate - to live for.

But it was hard.

Because Jasper, a woman she had manipulated years ago with fatal results, who she feared more than just about anyone on Earth, was driving the car, barely saying a word the whole trip, though occasionally stealing a menacing glare towards Lapis in the rear view mirror or over her shoulder. Every flash of her eyes, every flicker of attention sent a chill down her spine, guessing what Jasper wanted to do with her. And whether she'd get the chance.

The only thing stopping her was Aquamarine, who occasionally chirped out a piece of small talk that went unanswered. Mostly she seemed engrossed in a door stop novel she'd brought along. Occasionally she "huh"ed or snickered or scoffed at some passage she found absurd or lacking, but mostly she was deadly silent, perfectly poised in her seat, an unnervingly even smile on her schoolgirl's face.

Calm. Collected. Terrifying.

Lapis thought about the million ways she could try escaping. The most obvious was unbuckling herself and jumping out of the moving car. But that almost certainly resulted in her death, or at least injury, making escape difficult. Perhaps even impossible. All that assumed that Aquamarine and Jasper wouldn't stop her first.

On the trip they only stopped once, waiting in an interminable line to get gasoline before the prices shot up an extra dime. While they waited, Jasper went inside to grab some food for herself (Aquamarine insisted she wasn't hungry), and noisily munched a greasy chicken sandwich in the driver's seat. Aquamarine's nostrils flared occasionally at the noxious smell and gross grumblings, but she said nothing.

At least until two drivers ahead of them got into a fight and started cursing at each other. The fight continued until one brandished a tire iron and started smashing the other man's window.

"Fucking OPEC," was Aquamarine's only comment on the situation.
Lapis tried to keep her mind focused on the farm house. She was gambling that they’d let her live that long, which was no guarantee. But there she had a little room for maneuver there, a better chance of running and hiding and maybe even fighting back. If nothing else, she could take a look around and try planning something while they looked for the Jewels, try delaying them until she could gain some kind of upper hand, and then she could make her move at the opportune moment.

Even better, she wondered if the Crystal Gems might be there waiting for her. If Peridot and her strange vigilante friends would be in at the farm house able to fight back and save Lapis and expose the secrets and make things right.

It was a slender reed to grasp, but it was something.

Still, an image of herself being forced to kneel in the dirt as Jasper shot her in the head or broke her neck or did other things she'd care not to think about continually flashed through her mind. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't tamp it down.

It's just a thought, she told herself over and over again. Just a fear. Just a possibility. It hasn't happened yet.

Then she'd look at Jasper's malevolent eyes or hear Aquamarine snickering at some ridiculous bit of prose, and wonder how much comfort that gave her.

Not much.

But it was something.

Topaz sat in her hotel room most of the day, trying to keep her nerves under control.

She tried TV, but she couldn't find much that interested her. Just news and reruns of sitcoms and detective shows that she didn't care for. Both baseball league championships had ended in three game sweeps, and the World Series wouldn't begin for another few days anyway.

She thought about reading, but there wasn't anything except a two day old newspaper and the obligatory hotel Bible on offer. She cursed herself, wondering if it would have been that hard to stuff one of her true crime books into a knapsack before she left.

She bought some beer from a convenience store just down the way. It probably wasn't wise to drink the night before a big mission, but what the hell. It wasn't a mission she cared overmuch whether she screwed up or not. Except that failure might end her life.

Mostly, despite the drink, she wallowed in guilt and fear.

She still wasn't entirely sure why she'd spared Pearl's life. Or betrayed Aquamarine, for that matter. Maybe she couldn't execute an injured woman who could barely stand. Maybe she just felt this mission was a bit too far, even with all the awful things she'd done in the past.

She should have known that making deals with someone like Aquamarine would come back to haunt her. How beating a long-ago murder rap wasn't worth being forced to kill, again and again, until it became second nature and completely dehumanized her and made her wonder whether she even deserved the title human any more.

But all of that had happened years ago, and it was much too late to back out.

But what if Aquamarine found out how she'd not only spared Pearl, but given her advice?
She already seemed, at the very least, suspicious during their phone conversation. She didn't know whether Aquamarine and Jasper were coming alone - she could probably handle the two of them if absolutely necessary - or with a whole team of assassins.

Even as her mind turned into alcoholic mush, she tried to weigh her options. None of them seemed entirely satisfying.

What good would her helping the Crystal Gems do? Even if we killed Aquamarine and Jasper, that wouldn't be the end of it. And my life would ruined. I'd spend the rest of my life on the lam, running and hiding...

Or, she could run off now. But that wouldn't achieve anything, either. Maybe delay the inevitable. But Aquamarine was expecting her. And when that woman sets her mind to something...

But she couldn't see herself just doing the mission and killing people, either...

Better to sit here and let come what may.

Finally a cruddy old Western with Randolph Scott came on the television. Topaz lurched into bed and watched it, a typical cowboys-and-bandits story that didn't really interest her but offered a moment's escape.

Eventually beer and a cliched storyline caught up with Topaz, and she dozed off.

A few hours later, she heard a loud tap on the hotel door. The television had switched over to The Waltons, to her chagrin; the mere sight of John-Boy gave Topaz nausea.

She dragged herself half-dressed out of bed, not bothering to put on pants or grab her pistol. Instead she shuffled heavily to the door, absently ran a hand through her hair and opened it warily.

"Sorry we were running late," Aquamarine chirped as she brushed past Topaz into the hotel room. "Had to stop for gas and you know what that's like these days..."And she rushed into the bathroom without further elaboration.

Jasper coughed violently in greeting as she entered, hurrying over to the bed to sit down and collect herself. When she saw what was playing on the television she groaned and through her shoe at the set.

That left Lapis. Who stood on the doorstep for a long moment, her eyes downcast with fear and worry.

At first Topaz thought she was contemplating escape. But she seemed too scared, too deep in thought to try anything just that moment.

Topaz felt a stab of guilt, wondering what this girl had done to suffer like this.

"Hey, are you all right?" she asked.

Lapis cocked her head. She was surprised that any of her kidnappers would even pretend to care about her. She answered, completely deadpan:

"Well, I'm scheduled to be shot within the next few hours, so...how do you think?"

Topaz didn't have an answer to that; she fidgeted, bit her lip, and played with her short hair some more.
In the background, she heard Jasper change the channel to *Barney Miller*.

"It's gonna be cold tonight, so..." Topaz offered helplessly, aware that any kindness she showed would be fleeting and pointless.

"I don't mind standing," Lapis said. "Aquamarine said she's gonna buy us a separate room, anyway."

For some reason, that stung Topaz.

"Oh?" she asked, trying to hide her irritation.

"Yeah...me and her together, then you and Jasper."

Ugh...*of course*.

"Guess she doesn't trust you with either of us," Topaz growled. Then completed the thought: "Either of us...brutes."

"That's what I'm thinking," Lapis said, crossing her arms impatiently. "I mean, it doesn't matter to me whether I spend my last night in a warm bed with a collected psychopath or getting beaten to a pulp by a couple of thugs..."

"I'm not a thug," Topaz muttered, leaning her forehead against the door frame as a headache stung her. She heard Lapis make a scoffing noise and start to move past her. Then grabbed her arm.

"Lapis...Whatever happens to you...Don't worry about Jasper."

She meant it as a kindness, an implication that if the girl had to die, it would be merciful.

But Lapis just smirked. She wasn't interested in *that* kind of mercy.

And Topaz saw her point. Realized how absurd her offer seemed to be.

"I'm sorry," she muttered. Which seemed to make Lapis angrier.

"Well, my dear, we can't stay and chat," Aquamarine said, emerging from the restroom. "You and Jasper can spend the night together, Topaz. Me and Lapis will be acquainted. I got a little sleep between Wheeling and Cleveland so if need be, I can stay awake. Of course," she said to Lapis, practically leering at the girl, "I don't expect we'll encounter any difficulties."

Lapis muttered something under her breath.

"Come come, let's check in," she said, leading Lapis out of the room. "We'll try and get a nicer room than this..."

Topaz closed the door after them and leaned against the doorway. She let out a belch, which lingered and turned into a long, empty sigh.

"Anywhere good to eat around here?" Jasper demanded, stifling another cough. She saw a half-empty long neck setting on the dresser and, to Topaz's disgust, drank from it.

Topaz groaned and walked past the dresser to the toilet and puked her guts out.

Eventually the two settled in together, just drinking and watching TV. Jasper said that *Streets of San*
Francisco came on next, which was her favorite cop show because the showrunners "got what it means to be a cop." Since Jasper had never been a cop herself, Topaz wondered how the hell she would know.

By now Topaz had showered and straightened herself up, just a bit. Her hangover was starting to clear up, enough to focus and pay a little attention to the television, at least, not that silly sitcoms were that hard.

It was still unnerving setting next to Jasper. Partly because she knew who the woman was, knew all about her history. Partly because that deep, nagging cough from Lapis's bullet wound kept cropping up every few minutes. She had a haunted, haggard look indicating that she wasn't long for this world.

Yet sitting there on the bed, she seemed just like anyone else. Another person settling in from a long day of work for their favorite shows, with nothing to care about except a beer and some peanuts she'd wrangled from the lobby vending machine.

Which made Topaz feel even worse.

Because both of them would go to sleep and rest and wake up tomorrow morning, just like anyone else. And then shower and get dressed and maybe eat breakfast and head out and do their job.

Only their job involved retrieving top secret files and murdering a twenty-something woman. And possibly a few others, as well.

Topaz couldn't square it. But she had to try.

"Nice drive?" she asked, sitting next to Jasper, who was now laying comfortably on the bed finishing off a beer.

"Nice as eight hours in a car with Miss Priss and Lady Lazuli could be," she said.

"Hmm. Aquamarine is a real pain, huh?"

Topaz looked at her with utter bafflement.

"Are you joking? I hate that bitch. Always have. She's a monster in ways I couldn't even..."

Jasper squeezed her long neck so hard, Topaz thought she'd shatter it in her hand.

"Look...I know what I am, all right?" Jasper said. "I'm a piece of shit. I'm a monster. I kill people for a living. Fix problems. Hide government secrets. Maybe part of me thinks, you know, there's some higher reason for it. Used to be patriotism. Then it was fighting Communism. Maybe part of me still believes in all that, I dunno. Would be nice if I could. But these days...man, patriotism is just a rotten joke. Patriotism means killing people the government doesn't like. Sweeping things under the rug. Making the country a sinkhole."

Topaz seemed genuinely surprised to hear this from Jasper.

"But Aquamarine...Look, I can handle being who I am. I've been doing this shit for almost two decades, I'm numb to it. But I can't stand that hoity-toity bitch. She still thinks, somehow, that she's a good person. A righteous person. Because she murdered some old squadristi when she was a teenager. Because she's still convincing herself she's fighting the Second World War every time she puts a bullet in someone’s head. And I can't stand that stuck-up, tight-assed self-righteousness."
"I mean, what is it with her? You know she regards people like you and me as trash. God knows what she thinks of Lazuli. We're all just gross, disgusting pawns she can move around the chessboard when she needs us. So that she can go home to her family every night and convince herself that she did evil in the name of good."

Topaz didn't say anything. She didn't disagree, didn't have anything to add, so she just nodded silently as Jasper continued vomiting her rage.

"And what do I get? What do you get? Maybe if I'm lucky, I'll die and get a star in Langley so a few tourists might wonder who I am. And Aquamarine will keep going on, protected by the system, until she's like DCI or the first female Secretary of Defense or whatever shit they have in store for her. Because she's polite and respectable and well-connected and has a fucking English accent! And the rest of us red-blooded Americans who do the same exact thing get screwed!"

Topaz thought this through for a long moment. Wondered if offering sympathy, even a way out would matter.

"You know...we don't have to do this."

Topaz said this quickly, quietly, tentatively, then winced, expecting an explosion.

Instead, Jasper pretended she didn't hear it, standing up to turn off the television. Then she went into the bathroom. Topaz heard the sounds of running water.

And Topaz sat there, terrified what might happen when Jasper came out. Her gun was still on the nightstand across the bed.

After a long, tense moment, Jasper came out, drying off her hair and her face. Then she walked back to the bed and sat down next to Topaz, staring at the wall. Until finally, she spoke.

"You know, for all that...I hate Aquamarine. But...I'm not going to betray her. Because betraying her is...I look at it like this. I've been doing this for so damn long...I mean, might as well see it through. This will probably be my last mission. And then they'll put me out to seed or, I dunno, maybe bury me in a pit on the farm. But at least...I mean, it's what I deserve. After everything I've done...how else could it end?"

The self-loathing cut Topaz to the bone. She wanted to reach out and give Jasper a hug, or at least a hand clasp, but worried what reaction that would bring.

Maybe part of her was still hoping that Jasper could be talked around to doing the right thing. So she tried again:

"What about Lapis?"

Jasper rounded on her, suddenly furious.

"Lapis? Lapis deserves what she gets," she growled. "She's even worse than Aquamarine. And God willing, I'll be the one to give it to her."

Topaz didn't like the sound of that. She clenched her fists and turned towards Jasper.

"No, you won't," she said quietly.

"Excuse me?" Jasper asked.
"I don't know who Lapis is or what she did," Topaz said (and Jasper's scornful glare offered proof of this), "but...okay, maybe we need to kill her. Maybe she's a traitor or a liability or all these awful things. But if we're going to kill her...might as well just kill her. She's already been through enough."

Jasper looked at her, suddenly possessed of her trademark rage. Topaz instantly steeled herself for a fight.

"She could never suffer **enough**!" Jasper shouted. "Don't you get it, you woolly-headed imbecile? Don't get all **sentimental** on me" (sentimental, that same word Aquamarine had used earlier). "She **used me**, like a piece of meat, to steal my information and steal the files and kill two of my friends! I've never been...In all my years with the Agency, I've never been so...

She seemed on the verge of crying, her rage giving way to sorrow at the memory, at how much she'd been messed up by Lapis and the CIA. But she managed to collect herself, stifled her tears and stared stoically at Topaz, unable to completely hide the pain.

"Well, I'm sorry that happened," Topaz said. "But if we're going to...kill her, it's going to be the right way."

Jasper snorted. "The right way is the way she deserves."

"You don't get it, Jasper. **I'm** going to kill her. Not you, not Aquamarine. She's going to die quickly and painlessly. And whatever she did...she deserves to have her suffering ending. Now. Immediately. Let God or the Devil judge her for what she's done."

And then she looked downcast. "God knows that we here on Earth have done enough to her."

"Not enough. **Never** enough." Jasper muttered, almost like a mantra.

"Well, if you lay a hand on her tomorrow...just know, I'll kill you, too."

Jasper bristled at this. Topaz's voice lost its uncertainty, taking on a fierce, steely resolve.

"And Aquamarine, if I have to," she added, warming to her insubordination. "I don't care what happened before, to any of us. This all ends **tomorrow**."

And Topaz shot Jasper a deadly serious glare. The two killers stared at each other for a long moment, each thinking that they'd come blows then and there.

For now, though, Jasper just laughed bitterly at her partner and turned away.

"I'd like to see you try," she scoffed.

As if nothing had happened, she stood up and turned the television back on, before settling back down on the bed and commenting on the stupid show with Rick Hurst now playing on TV.

And Topaz stared blankly at the screen, basking in the surreality of everything. And wondering how in the hell she got here.
October 9, 1975

It took awhile for the Gems to decide on their next course of action. Mostly because it started to rain heavily just as they were preparing for bed.

"We can't camp outside in the rain!" Pearl complained as they huddled inside the tiny farmhouse. "We don't have tents or sleeping bags or any of the equipment..."

"Well, we sure as hell can't sleep in here," Amethyst complained, shivering in the cold air. "Dark and cold and no room to sleep anyway. And if you're worried about the mud, who knows what the hell is moving around here in the dark?"

Pearl remembered the unseen critter which had traipsed across her ankle earlier, and shivered again.

"Point taken," she said. "But it's almost 10:00, and I wouldn't think there are any hotels we can go to, do you?"

"There's always some fleabag rat box somewhere that'll take us in," Greg said. "I mean, you hang out around enough small towns, you know these things. It'll probably be a dump, but they usually have a roof and something resembling a bed."

"There's one problem with that," Garnet said. "We don't have any money."

The impact of that statement silenced the room.

"Fuck." Amethyst muttered at last.

"We spent the last of our money on gas driving up here," Garnet said. "I don't have any cash left, just a few rolls of coins. That might be enough to get a cheap hamburger somewhere, but it's not gonna buy us a room anywhere."

"Don't look at me," Amethyst said unprompted. "I'm always broke."

"You always have money," Garnet reminded her, "but you never tell us where you get it from."

"Because it's none of your business," Amethyst pouted.

"What happened to trusting each other?" Garnet asked, more teasing than serious.

"Fuck that," Amethyst said, defensively. "Nothing you need to know about."

"Something illegal, I'm guessing," Pearl huffed.

Amethyst stared open-mouthed at that comment. Pearl didn't seem to realize what she'd just said until she caught Garnet's glare through the dark.

"I cannot believe you just said that," Amethyst muttered. "But, of course you did. You said that here, right now, when we're in the middle of..."
"Amethyst..."

"Of course, it makes total sense! I'm a Latina so naturally I'm a criminal..."

"That's not what I meant!" Pearl insisted. "It's not. It's just...What are we supposed to think?"

"Why are you supposed to care?" Amethyst shouted. She pushed past Garnet and ran out into the rain.

"Amethyst!" Garnet called after her, to no avail.

"Amethyst, wait!" Peridot said, running out after her to everyone's surprise. She squealed as some raindrops touched down on her, but she kept moving anyway.

Everyone was deadly silent for a long moment, listening to the sound of the rain and a thunderclap.

"Garnet...I didn't mean...that's not what I..." Pearl sputtered a half-formed apology. She seemed on the verge of tears.

"You need to convince her of that," Garnet said, her teeth on edge. Even she seemed a bit offended by what Pearl had said. Everyone else was deathly silent.

"I...I don't know what to say," Pearl muttered.

"I can't believe you, Pearl," Garnet snapped, finally letting some long-simmering anger off her chest. "You know how much Amethyst looks up to you. You know how hard she works to make you respect her. And right now, because of you, she's crushed. Just when we need everyone on the same page..."

Garnet stopped herself and turned away, taking some deep breaths while resting her head against the wall.

Pearl absorbed Garnet's accusatory tone, feeling even worse than before. She buried her head between her knees, wishing she could sink into the floor.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't. Tell. Me," Garnet said, not facing her. Pearl stood up, looked at Garnet, who shot her an angry glance. Pearl blushed and wandered off into the darkness.

"Garnet, you guys were pretty rough on her," Greg said softly.

"You would say that," Garnet grumbled.

"What does that mean?" Greg responded.

Garnet looked like she was about to say something cutting, then thought better of it.

"Nothing," she grumbled. "It's not your fault, you're just sticking up for...Of course, you would stick up for Pearl, wouldn't you?"

"Garnet, I don't know what you want me to say here," Greg said, a little confused. "I mean, I get what you're driving at...I think. I'm white, she's white, you guys aren't. But...You really think...Man."

Greg crossed his arms and turned away.
"I'm not perfect," he admitted. "But I thought you'd think better of me than that."

"No, you aren't perfect," Garnet said. Then she added, with bitterness. "But neither am I. And neither of us should have to be."

Greg took a step closer to Garnet.

"I always have to be the mature one around here, don't I?" Garnet complained. "The one who balances everything out? The one who keeps the team together? Sometimes it gets on my fucking nerves. Especially because...yes, because I'm black. I've spent my whole damn life being told to keep my mouth shut and not to get emotional. And I'm a woman on top of that, so I have two fucking strikes against me."

Garnet seemed a little angry at herself for losing control of her emotions. But she wasn't going to stop venting now.

"And now, we all need to be on the top of our game tomorrow, and...this isn't helping. I'm sorry, Greg. I shouldn't have snapped at you. You were just trying to help."

She managed to collect herself and stormed past him into the darkness.

Greg felt his way towards a chair in the dark and sat down, unsure what else he could do.

Amethyst was soaking wet by the time she reached the barn. But she didn't care. She couldn't stand to be in the house any more.

When she was inside and safely dry, she started crying heavily. Angry and sad and self-hating all at once. And she kept punching the gravel floor, uncaring that it left abrasions on her fists.

A thunderclap stuck nearby, grabbing Amethyst's attention. And she saw a small figure dripping wet in the door frame.

Peridot.

"What do you want?" Amethyst muttered.

Peridot shook her head like a dog, trying to fling some of the water out of her hair.

"I, uh, thought you might want some company?" she said uncertainly.

"Not really," Amethyst insisted, scowling and trying to hide her tears.

"Come on, I know what it's like to..." And Peridot cut herself off, realizing that Amethyst might not be in the mood for a heart-to-heart talk about prejudice.

Instead, she sat down next to Amethyst. When Amethyst didn't pull away or yell at her, she drew a little closer.

"Is there anything I can do?" Peridot asked cautiously. "I mean, I am terrible at comforting people or
"You could leave me alone," Amethyst grumbled.

"Assume that's not an option," Peridot said flatly. Amethyst muttered something.

"Where does Pearl get off...? I just don't get it. After all we've been through, she makes a crack about me being a criminal? What was that?"

She didn't seem just upset in the moment, but deeply hurt, like something that had been eating at her for a long time.

"Well...I don't think she meant anything by it," Peridot offered lamely.

"Doesn't matter if she meant anything by it," Amethyst snapped. "She said it. That thought's been lingering somewhere in the back of her head all this time. After everything we've done together...She's just like everyone else."

And she said the last sentence with quiet, wistful resignation, as if Pearl had affirmed everything bad Amethyst thought about herself.

Peridot clasped her hand, offering comfort. But she still couldn't think of the right thing to say. Or anything approximating it.

"I haven't known you that long," she started, trying to sound officious, "but...you've always been nice to me. I don't know how the others see me. I haven't interacted with Garnet that much, and Pearl...well, our relationship still seems more...professional than anything. But you have been nice to me since we first met. Why?"

"I dunno," Amethyst said. "I try to be nice to everybody. No reason to be a jerk to somebody you've just met."

"Maybe. But...our first real conversation was you giving me advice on...Lapis."

Peridot's voice cracked just saying her name. But she powered through it.

"And you had no reason to, Amethyst. Except that you're a good person. I don't know what you've done in the past, but...everything I've seen indicates that you're an awesome woman."

"Pfft, okay," Amethyst scoffed.

"I mean it."

"I mean, if you're waiting for me to disagree that I'm awesome...Well, I'm not. Awesome, I mean. I am who I am, you know. And I try to be comfortable in my own skin, but people give me grief about so many fucking things...I just wish my friends wouldn't, you know?"

She sighed and buried her head in her hands.

"I feel so stupid getting upset over that, though," Amethyst admitted. "Because Pearl...well, she's trying. She tries every day. But she's still who she always was, to some degree. And it can be irritating to deal with. I just wish it wouldn't take that form...Because things like that hurt."

Peridot nodded and patted her shoulder. To her surprise, Amethyst responded with a crushing hug.

"Well, you've got other things on your mind, I'm sure," Amethyst sympathized. "Your friend..."
"Yeah."
"I hope she's okay."
"Yeah."
"If she isn't..."
"Yeah?"
"I'll tear those fuckers apart with my bare hands for you."

Peridot laughed and nodded gratefully. "Yeah."

The two shared a nervous chuckle. Then Amethyst rolled over on her back and stared at the ceiling for a moment. Peridot sat there, unsure what to do. But the tension from before had dissipated.

"Do you wanna tell me how you make money?" Peridot asked.

Amethyst gnawed on a stray stand of her hair.

"Promise not to tell the guys?" she asked.

"Of course not," Peridot said, kicking her feet like a teenager at a sleepover. "So..."

"I model."

"That's it?" Peridot seemed nonplussed.

"Yeah. I'm an artist's model. Have a friend in Arlington who likes to paint me, for some reason. Says I'm a good subject."

"That's...huh."

"Sometimes she has me pose for her classes. It's a little weird, I don't especially like doing it, but it's easy and...it earns me money. And it's better than working for a living, am I right?"

Peridot chuckled slightly. "I guess so. Why do you feel like that's not something you could tell them? I guess I don't understand."

"Because...why is it their business? Though I guess not telling them...kinda brings things like this on myself."

"Hmm." Peridot considered this. "I don't think you deserve to be called...names. Any more than I do, or Garnet does, or anyone else. Believe me, I've heard a lot in my day. But...yeah, I respect your privacy and I don't think it's their business if you don't want to tell them. Just seems like an odd thing to keep as a secret. Especially when you guys try to put so much trust in each other..."

"It's such a small thing," Amethyst admitted. "I dunno. I just feel like I need some part of me to be me, and not a Crystal Gem. I'm not as smart as you, Perry, I can't really explain...the answer's deeper than I can express."

Peridot just nodded. "I understand."

And she laid down next to Amethyst, both of them staring at the barn ceiling.
It was a nice moment between them, until a big wet drop of water came down through a crack in the ceiling and dripped straight into Amethyst's eye. And Peridot couldn't help squealing with delight, glad to have her mind on something light for a change.

Garnet found Pearl cowering in the kitchen, her arms crossed, rocking back and forth. Even in the dim light, Garnet thought Pearl had been crying.

The worst of Garnet's anger had subsided. She no longer felt rage or anger towards Pearl, and she wanted to show compassion and understanding. But she also wanted to be clear that it wasn't acceptable.

How to thread that needle? It would be tough.

Because calling Pearl out for her behavior didn't always go so well. Sometimes she retreated into herself or else spat defiance and grew stubborn and angry. At least she didn't expect the latter.

But she knew Pearl was an adult, and she had to face facts. Some things were unacceptable.

"Pearl..." Garnet said, approaching her cautiously.

"When I first met Amethyst," Pearl said...not sure what to say. "She was so strange to me. Like, exactly the kind of person my parents had taught me to avoid. She was loud, she was opinionated, she hated the system, and...yes. She wasn't white. I never thought of myself or my parents as prejudiced, but...shows what I know. You can't avoid it, no matter how hard you try.

"And at first I thought that she hated me, and I resented her hating me. But the more time we spent together, the more I recognized what an incredible woman she was. How unfair I'd been to...judge her like I did. And for me to say something like that to her, now..."

"Pearl..." Garnet began, measuring her words. "What you said was hurtful and wrong. And you know it was. That's a start. But...I'm not going to tell you it's okay. I don't think it's good to express those attitudes, even if you can't help having them. But lecturing you's not going to make them go away, either. I understand that."

She drew closer.

"We've got bigger fish to fry. For all we know, Aquamarine and Jasper and Topaz are on their way right now with an arm of heavily armed goons. We need this team to function as a unit. Even the tiniest bit of friction can hurt us tomorrow. Maybe its' silly, but I don't wanna take my chances going up against that lot."

"How can I make it right?" Pearl asked quietly. "I don't know if she'll let me apologize."

"She will," Garnet said. "She just needs some time. When you see her next...well, it will be easier."

Pearl let out a ragged sigh. "We're doing better."

"Yep."

"These conversations used to take a lot longer," Pearl said with a sad, wistful smile.

"They did," Garnet said. "You're doing well." She shot her friend a thumb's up.

"Hmm. Well, I'll never be perfect, but..."
"I respect that, Pearl. I really do. And I'm glad that you're doing everything you can to overcome a lot. That means you're a good person. Never, ever doubt that."

Pearl shook her head in disagreement, but didn't say anything. She felt tears welling up in her eyes as she thought about it.

"Should I...go apologize now?" Pearl asked tentatively.

"Peridot is with Amethyst," Garnet said. "If they want to come back inside tonight, they will. If not...well, let her blow off some steam first. Can't hurt. Might help. And tomorrow's another day."

"I hope you're right," Pearl said, her words freighted with a double meaning.

And Garnet didn't respond. She didn't know what to say.

Pearl didn't sleep much that night. It was too cold and too uncomfortable. The heavy must of the old farm house, the sounds of the rain and the wind and the vermin were all too distracting.

Somehow, Greg fell asleep, snoring as he always did. And Garnet stood watch in the door as usual, shotgun in hand, until around 3:00 in the morning when she sat down in a chair and dozed off.

Pearl realized that if she didn't sleep, she wouldn't be sharp. Because who knew what would happen tomorrow?

They hadn't really made a plan. Because they didn't know who was coming, or when. Or how to fight back.

Her first thought was to protect the Jewels. They had spent the day examining them, and they'd been everything they'd dreaded and feared.


Every single thing Pearl and her team had known, or suspected, in incriminating, undeniable.

All Peridot had to do was hand this to a reporter, or possibly Senator Dewey, and it would be a story in and of itself. It seemed so easy.

But they had to survive first. That might not be so easy.

Pearl wasn't so much worried about what the next day would bring, in and of itself. She was used to fighting. But there were too many outside variables weighing on her.

There was Amethyst, whom she'd insulted and alienated without in any way intending to.

There was Peridot, who was in over her head and in graver danger than she could accept.

There was Greg, who was a nice guy and tried his best to help, but was pretty much useless in a fight.

There was Lapis, who...she didn't want to think about Lapis.

But she couldn't help it.
The next day would be the biggest test the Crystal Gems had ever faced. Or at least, the most important. And they didn't seem anything like ready.

Pearl's brain finally shut down enough to allow a few hours of dark, dreamless sleep. It didn't help. She woke up just before dawn, saw everyone else still fast asleep around her. She walked into the early morning air, shivering in the fog, watching the first specks of sunrise appear on the horizon.

At least it had stopped raining. But the roofs and plants were still dripping with water and perspiration, and the muddy ground squished beneath Pearl's shoes.

Pearl walked through the field and made her way to the barn. She poked her head inside...

And saw Amethyst fast asleep on her back, snoring. Peridot was tossing and turning a few feet away, mumbling loudly in her sleep. Pearl could swear she heard the word "clod" more than once.

Tentatively, she walked over to Amethyst and bent down over her. Watching her as she slept.

It wasn't until Amethyst's eyes bolted open that she realized how creepy she was being.

"Pearl, seriously?" Amethyst groaned. "I thought we've been over this."

She pushed Pearl away from her, more playful than angry.

"Well, I'm sorry...I just wanted to, um, make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine," Amethyst said, sitting up and stretching. "I had Perry here to watch my back."

Peridot curled up into a ball and made a weird mewing noise. Pearl grimaced.

"Amethyst..." Pearl said, wanting to cut to the chase. "I, um..."

"Pearl. We don't need to talk about it." Amethyst assured her.

That came as a surprise.

"Umm...are you sure?"

"Yeah. You said something insensitive and I overreacted. It's not exactly cool, but...it's not that big a deal."

"Amethyst, I feel terrible about..." Pearl began.

"I know you do," Amethyst said, cutting her off. "And I preemptively accept your apology. I just wish...I didn't think you thought that way about me."

Pearl bent down and gave Amethyst a hug.

"I don't. I'm so sorry to make you think otherwise."

They hugged for a long minute, the action affirming them more than words.

It was Peridot who first noticed something was wrong.

She bolted out of her sleep, look around in shock, and screamed in surprise, running back towards the house.
Amethyst and Pearl released each other and looked up to see what Peridot was reacting to.

Two headlights in the distance, piercing through the fog. Driving up the road to the house.

Amethyst and Pearl didn't need to see anything else before running after Peridot. They instantly knew what it meant.

_They were here._

Chapter End Notes

Hi all! We're nearing the end of the story, so a few small, non-spoilery hints of where things are heading:

- The big climax is next! Expect it to take at least two chapters, unless it takes a lot less time to write that I'm planning. After that, probably a few more chapters of falling action to tie up loose ends.

- Warning: I'm considering major character deaths at this point. Will have to see how the next few chapters work out.

Thanks as always for reading!
October 10, 1975

Even through the fog, Lapis recognized the Llewelyn farmhouse. She instantly spotted the large living space, silhouetted though it was in the early morning light. And the barn’s silo, poking up through the fog. She watched the clouds of mist drifting across the now-barren fields.

This was it. This was the end of the line. Possibly the end of her life.

Unless she could think her way out.

She tamped down her fear as Topaz grabbed her arm, pulling her roughly forward. As coolly as the situation allowed, she assessed her options again.

Running was possible only if she chose the right moment. With Topaz pulling her tightly, and Jasper right there eager for an excuse to use excessive violence, and God knows what Aquamarine had up her sleeve, she didn't expect to have an opportunity. The farmland and the fog might offer some protection, but only temporarily.

Besides, even if she escaped, it seemed like a fool's errand. Where would she go? How far could she get? Who would help her? What came next?

Fighting would be very difficult. She didn't have a gun or knife and wasn't nearly as strong as either of Aquamarine's henchmen. She had never seen Aquamarine herself in action, but knew that she'd managed to hold her own against the Gems at the beach house, and that was enough to frighten her. Even if, on this morning, she walked with a cane and groaned occasionally from her stiff back.

She had no idea if the Gems were there, or even if they knew where to look. She hoped her letter to Peridot would be clue enough, but wouldn't wager on that right now.

She decided to play along and lead them. Cooperate until you can't anymore. Then make your move.

But what would that move be?

She'd have to figure that out when it happened. Until then, patience.

"What's the plan? Do we have a plan?" Peridot squawked, running around in panic. "What are we going to do? Is Lapis with them? Oh God!"

"Peridot, calm down," Garnet urged, watching the shadowy figures approach through the fog.
"How many are there?" Pearl asked, nervously fiddling with her sword.

"Four," Garnet said, peering through the window.

"That sounds about right," Pearl said, trying to keep her voice even, though Garnet noticed that she was clasping her hands together.

"So we outnumber them," Amethyst said. "I like those odds!"

"Well, it depends on how many of us fight," Garnet said, looking around Greg, who seemed frightened by the prospect, and Peridot who was still struggling to contain her panic.

"And how we fight them," she added. "We don't really have time to prepare a proper reception, so we'll have to play it by ear. We have to assume that they're here to kill."

She emphasized this latter point by loading a live shell into her shotgun. Pearl visibly winced, and Amethyst's combative grin turned into a determined scowl.

She paused for a moment, watching the figures grow closer. She could guess that the two largest figures on either end were Jasper and Topaz.

She could also assume that the fourth figure was Aquamarine, both from her size and how she stood several steps behind the rest, as if finding their presence distasteful.

Hopefully, the fourth figure was Lapis.

"I think the best way to face them is to spread out," Pearl suggested. "Give them as many targets as possible so they can't bunch us together."

"Remember that, if they have Lapis, she could be an impediment for them as well," Garnet reminded Pearl. "We need to be as quick and precise as possible."

"I don't do precise," Amethyst complained.

"Neither do I," Garnet admitted. "But there's someone here who's good at both of those things."

She smiled at Pearl, who nodded gratefully.

"The rest of us just have to do our part," Garnet continued. She turned again Greg.

"Greg, you know you don't have to get mixed up in this..."

Greg shrugged off her warning. "I am mixed up in this," he reminded her. "If I can help, I will."

Garnet shot him her usual thumbs-up; Pearl gave a warm, appreciative smile.

Then Amethyst handed Greg her .45.

"Here ya go," Amethyst said. "Look after this baby for me."

Greg weighed the gun unevenly in his hand. "Umm, okay, but I haven't really fired one of these since basic training..."

"Ehh, I'm a terrible shot," Amethyst said dismissively. "Won't do me any good. Besides, I'd rather get whippy." And she brandished her whip.
Greg looked askance at Garnet, who shrugged.

"You wanted to help," she said.

"And I want to help, too," Peridot insisted.

"You sure about that?" Pearl warned. "Remember what happened last time you tried to help?"

Peridot shook her head. "Last time, I wasn't there," she said, her voice weighed with regret.

"Well, you're here now," Garnet said, putting a hand on her shoulder. And Peridot took strength from her reassurance.

Still, it didn't answer an obvious question...how was she going to fight?

The four women didn't speak. Lapis simply led and they followed, until they found the small pumpkin patch by the side of the house.

Lapis looked around the rotting vegetation, noticing the footprints and hand marks from the Gems. Thinking they might be animals, hoping - or fearing - they might belong to people.

Finally, she reached the spot where she had buried the papers. And gasped.

Gone. Just an empty hole in the ground.

"No..." A moan escaped her voice, as she realized what this meant.

"Problem?" Aquamarine asked.

Lapis turned towards her. "It...it was right here," she stammered quietly. "I buried them here."

Aquamarine walked over and examined the small hole carefully.

"Looks like an empty hole to me," she said. Then she turned to Lapis's face and smiled an evil scowl.

"Or a grave."

She snapped her fingers and Topaz threw Lapis to the ground. Lapis brought herself to her knees, until Jasper grabbed her by the shirt and forced her down.

"Settle down, brat," she growled. "Just be glad that I'm not the one doing this."

After a moment, she released her grip and nodded at Topaz.

Topaz grimly produced her pistol and cocked it, aiming it at the back of Lapis's head.

"Dear, if you thought you could mislead us you made a huge mistake," Aquamarine said, painfully crouching down to Lapis's level. "If not, well, you're not of much use to us anywhere. I'll give you one. Last. Chance. Where are the Jewels?"

"This. Is. Where. They. Were." Lapis insisted through gritted teeth, her eyes clenched shut. She couldn't say anything else, and didn't want to beg for her life. But it didn't stop the despair from clouding her brain.
For the first time that day, Lapis started to panic.

They were here. I know they were here. I put them here. And nobody else knew.

"Pity." She heard Aquamarine's voice and felt Topaz shove her down. She could sense the gun being aimed at her head.

And finally, she realized it was truly over. That her life had finally come to an end.

Unless...

And a loud gunshot answered her prayers.

"Aquamarine, we'll give you one warning," Garnet barked, re-cocking her weapon. "Leave here immediately. Leave Lapis alone, and alive. This is all the chance you'll get."

Garnet stared out the front door, watching the quartet react.

"I knew this was a trap," Jasper growled, lunging at Lapis.

Lapis cried out as Topaz pulled her to her feet, grabbing her in a headlock and putting the gun to her head. Jasper stared at the young woman hatefully, then back at Garnet.

"I don't think a shotgun will help you save your friend," Aquamarine said, straightening herself up. "Too messy. Maybe if you were that much more heartless..."

"Cram it, you poncy limey bitch," Garnet ordered. But she realized that the little villain was right.

"Just you, then?" Aquamarine asked. "Where are your friends?"

"They're around," Garnet said mysteriously.

Aquamarine turned and saw Amethyst standing near the barn, with her whip lashed over her shoulder.

"Yo."

Another sound from nearby. The villains turned and saw Pearl leaning against the house, twirling her sword point against the porch, a sly grin on her face. Trying to look as cool as possible, which meant she looked like a secretary dressed as Zorro for Halloween.

Jasper growled and tensed her muscles, immediately preparing for a fight. Topaz looked from one Gem to the next with uncertainty and fear, gripping Lapis tight against her chest.

"The same crew as before," Aquamarine said approvingly, almost excited. "Fine, if you want a rematch..."

Before she could say any more, Greg pushed out past Garnet with a pistol in his hand.

"ALL RIGHT YOU MOTHERFUCKERS, NOBODY MOVE OR YOUR FUCKING HEADS COME OFF!"

His outburst startled Aquamarine and the others for just a moment, until they noticed his hands were shaking and his face etched with fear. Jasper snickered, while Aquamarine shot the musician a look of contempt.
"Someone's watched too many Clint Eastwood movies," Pearl muttered, shaking her head. Garnet just winced. Amethyst face palmed.

"I'm sorry," Greg apologized. "I told you I'm not good at this."

"And neither am I," Peridot said, emerging with a rusty hatchet in her hand.

"Peridot," Lapis muttered, trying to lurch free from Topaz's grip. Peridot's heart sank, but with some effort she managed to return herself to a fighting stance.

"Well, however many of you there are, it won't be enough," Jasper said.

Jasper drew her weapon and aimed it at Garnet, preparing to pull the trigger. Greg aimed his own weapon at Jasper in response, and Peridot shrank back.

"Enough talk," Amethyst said, "let's do this."

And she raised her whip and lashed the pistol out of Jasper's hand. Immediately she lunged forward and struck the hulking woman with her fist, then with the whip handle.

"DOWN!" Garnet cried, pushing Greg and a screaming Peridot out of the way as she fired a shotgun blast. The pellets smashed into the dirt in front of Aquamarine's feet; the woman coolly brushed the debris off her skirt.

"So much for precise," Pearl murmured, taking a deep breath before swinging into action.

She rushed towards Topaz, who turned and struggled to sight her pistol with Lapis squirming in her arms.

With lightning speed, Pearl slashed Topaz's right arm, a deep cut that went to the bone. Topaz cried out and dropped Lapis to the ground, hard. The girl landed on her head and groaned, struggling to avoid being stomped on.

Dazed, Topaz turned and fired a round at Pearl. Too late, as Pearl gashed her across the stomach, then down her right thigh.

Topaz let out an angry cry and dropped her weapon. With a lucky blow she managed to catch Pearl in the arm, temporarily stunning her, then reached down to pick up her pistol. Which was gone.

She looked over and saw Lapis running into the fog, gun in hand.

Behind Pearl and Topaz, Jasper broke away from Amethyst and aimed at Lapis, firing several shots into the mist.

"Hey, forget about your girlfriend," Amethyst teased Jasper, before punching her in the face. Jasper growled and pistol-whipped Amethyst in return.

Garnet's gun went off, missing Jasper wide and to the left, and she cursed herself for not having better aim. Jasper responded by emptying her clip at the house, forcing Garnet to take cover until Amethyst tackled her again.

All the while Aquamarine stood back a safe distance from the fighting, leaning on her cane and watching the action unfold like a mildly interested spectator.

"Lapis!" Pearl called to the girl, now barely visible as a gray silhouette in the distance. But she didn't respond.
Pearl felt a little sick, and more than a little disappointed with Lapis. Until another blow from Topaz brought her back to reality.

She turned with a cry and a spin, kicking Topaz's wounded shin then slashing her left shoulder. Topaz responded by punching Pearl in the face. As she fell, Pearl felt blood running from her nose.

From the ground, she could Amethyst somehow managing to hold her own against the much larger Jasper. Taking punches and pistol strikes with little ill effect. On the other hand, Jasper didn't seem much affected by Amethyst's blows either.

Pearl looked up and saw Topaz standing over her, bleeding and holding a truncheon in one hand. She looked angry and hurt and a little remorseful at once.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, as raised the truncheon.

Pearl managed to roll out of the way, grabbing her sword. She prepared to strike...

...and watched as a geyser of blood and flesh erupted from Topaz's side as Garnet blasted her with the shotgun. Watched her body topple over heavily.

Pearl stood and straightened herself up, looking at Topaz, who mouthed a few silent, meaningless syllables before expiring. She wiped the blood off her own nose, a bit aghast to see someone killed, especially the one person among them who seemed human, then turned back to the fight.

She saw Aquamarine and made a gesture towards her, but couldn't bring herself to strike the woman who was, so far, making no effort to defend herself. Instead she made towards Jasper, crying out again as she raised her sword to strike.

Lapis ran towards the treeline. She heard the gunshots, heard the shouts and the screams, heard Pearl calling after her, but didn't care. Her instinct was to escape.

She was a bit surprised, looking back over her shoulder, that no one was chasing her. Not even Aquamarine, who hadn't bothered to involve herself in the fight to this point.

For a moment, hope had returned. She thought about how easy it would be to escape into the woods. If Jasper and Topaz, at least, were incapacitated, that would give her more time to disappear.

More time to hide. More time to run.

Then, just as she reached the treeline, she remembered something she'd told herself, weeks ago now.

No more running.

And that thought stopped Lapis in her tracks.

She didn't do it for her allies, or for revenge, or even Peridot. She did it for herself.

Because it was time Lapis Lazuli stopped running. Time she stopped allowing others to control her. Time to take back her life.

Time to be her own woman.

She checked the safety on Topaz's weapon, took a moment to catch her breath and steady herself. Then started marching back towards the fight. She felt stabs of fear telling her to keep running, that she was acting crazy and that escape was right there. But she fought through them. Knowing there
was something more important at stake than living another day.

Jasper seemed immune to Amethyst's blows. The small young woman was tough and could take a lot of punishment, but she didn't seem able to inflict more than glancing injuries on the hulking goon. Even when she punched Jasper in the chest, expecting it to aggravate her bullet wound, Jasper just grimaced and collected herself.

Amethyst fell back, feeling the blood from a dozen cuts and sweat from a hundred pores. Adrenaline and will kept her going for now, but it seemed only a matter of time until her body broke down.

Grimacing from another heavy punch to the midsection, she raised herself on one knee, leaning against her whip handle.

"Is that all ya got?" she choked out, forcing the bravado to return. She tried to stand, but slipped, catching herself on the palms of her hand. Jasper waited patiently, breathing heavily like a running back between plays.

Amethyst finally stood up. She feebly struck Jasper with her whip, striking a glancing blow to her wrist, which seemed to amuse Jasper.

"Is that all you've got?" Jasper taunted back, grabbing the whip from Amethyst's hand and spilling the woman back down.

Before she could strike again, she heard Pearl's cry and felt her blade cut her across the shoulder blades.

Jasper cried out and lashed Pearl with the whip. Pearl reeled backwards, allowing Jasper to grab her by the arms, then knee her twice in the stomach.

Pearl felt the stitches from their previous fight tear open, groaning as fresh blood spread across her abdomen.

Then Jasper spotted Amethyst finally raising herself to her feet, a determined look on her face.

Jasper grabbed Pearl by the arm, knocking her off-balance. Then threw her towards Amethyst.

Pearl dug her heels into the ground, feeling dizzy and sick. As she collapsed she heard a cry, and saw...

No.

But she had.

Her sword had pierced Amethyst's shoulder.

The young woman stared gape-mouthed, in shock, at Pearl, then at Jasper. Then she sunk to her knees, losing consciousness.

"Amethyst!" Pearl cried out.

Before she could reacted, Jasper lifted her up, sneered sadistically, and punched her in the stomach once more.

Pearl collapsed to the ground, curling into a fetal position as the pain and blood overtook her. Jasper kicked aside her sword for good measure.
Garnet fired another shotgun round from the farmhouse, the pellets grazing Jasper's arm and face. She shook her head as if reacting to a bee sting, then growled with aggravation.

"Let's end this," Jasper muttered. She slammed another clip into her pistol as Garnet sighted her again, then aimed and fired two shots.

Garnet fell backwards into the house, dropping her weapon.

Jasper looked around at the injured women at her feet. Both Amethyst and Pearl were bleeding heavily; Amethyst was unconscious, and Pearl too badly hurt, it appeared, to fight. She decided not to waste bullets on them.

"Pearl! Amethyst!"

She saw Greg and Peridot emerge from the farmhouse. Peridot stood still in terror for a moment, taking in the horrifying scene before her. Greg, terrified, dropped to his knees and attended to Garnet, who appeared to be alive but hurt. Peridot turned over the hatchet in her hand, considering her courses of action, wondering whether fear would win out yet again.

Finally, she rushed towards Jasper with her hatchet in hand, screaming in defiant terror.

Amused, Jasper gave the young woman a head start before aiming at her head...

Then she heard another shot from behind her. Turned, and saw Lapis emerging through the fog, gun in hand, wearing a determined scowl.

"Don't. Move. Jasper."

She cocked the hammer to emphasize her warning.

"Well, this is an interesting development," Aquamarine commented. "Glad you came back, though - spares us the trouble of tracking you down again, later."

Jasper looked over and saw the petite woman bearing her usual superior smirk, leaning forward expectantly.

And just now, at just this moment, it was too much.

Jasper stole a quick glance at Topaz, to ensure that she was dead. Then smiled to herself, wondering who would stop her from doing what she'd wanted to do for a long, long time.

"Aquamarine, I'll take it from here," Jasper muttered.

Before Aquamarine could respond, the larger woman kicked her cane from under her, then struck her across the face with her pistol. Aquamarine fell backward into the mud with a muted cry, then lay still.

Jasper smiled and turned back towards Lapis, who didn't seem phased by what she'd witnessed.

"Finally, you're coming to me for a change..."

Lapis shot her in the wrist, causing Jasper to drop her weapon.

"I wasn't fucking joking," Lapis snapped, taking two steps forward. "Move another step and I'll splatter your brains. You know I can do it."
Jasper was more impressed by Lapis than afraid of her. She looked down at the gun, then back at Peridot, who had stopped her attack in mid-run, stunned by Lapis's reappearance. Her mouth was hanging open.

"Yeah, I know you can do it," Jasper said, taking a long stride towards her.

"I said..." Lapis began.

"I know you're a monster," she said, raising her hands in the air. "I know what you've done. You've done worse to people than shooting them."

She coughed and cleared her throat, swallowing a small blood clot jostled loose in the fighting.

"I've done some really rotten things in my time, I'll admit. Hurt a lot of people, killed some. I don't apologize for it, don't think I'm a good person because of it. Maybe I did those things for a reason, but..."

And instead of coming closer to Lapis, she backed away. This threw Lapis for a loop; she trembled, tensed herself, but didn't move.

"What reason did you possibly have for what you did?" Jasper mocked, stepping backwards. "You betrayed your country. You used me! Like a piece of meat! And you roasted two innocent people alive! And for what? To work out your issues?"

Lapis did nothing, but she did notice that Jasper was getting perilously close to Peridot. And the young woman, apparently oblivious, was still standing there.

"Is that what this all is?" Jasper continued. "The world's most fucked up therapy session?"

*Perry, please move,* Lapis begged silently.

But for some reason, she couldn't make herself say the words out loud.

"Well, I'm not a shrink, but there is a drastic cure I'd like to try," Jasper said.

Before Lapis could do anything, Jasper grabbed Peridot and lifted her off the ground.

"This little lady means something to you, doesn't she?" she asked.

"Put me down, you big hulking brute!" Peridot said helplessly, the hatchet falling from her hands.

Jasper ignored her, turning to face Lapis as Peridot struck her in the chest and shoulders with her tiny fists. A sick smile spread across her face.

"Well, maybe if you learn what it's like to lose someone you care about...Maybe that will help you appreciate what you have."

Lapis watched in horror as Jasper lowered Peridot to the ground. Wrapped her hands around Peridot's throat. And began to strangle her.

Peridot struggled madly, let out several choked gasps. But she was nowhere near strong enough to break free.

Her limbs flailed and twitched. Her face turned blue.

She shot Lapis a horrified look, eyes practically bulging from her head.
Lapis didn't hesitate. She aimed her pistol at Jasper and shot her through the shoulder.

Jasper fell back, releasing her grip on Peridot. Peridot fell to her knees, wheezing, then crumpled to the ground.

Lapis walked over towards them. She saw Peridot sprawled on the ground, groaning, and felt a stab of agony for her love. Wanted to throw down her gun and hug her.

But she had a job to finish, so she pretended not to notice.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you," Lapis said, standing over Jasper, who started coughing violently again, expelling more bloody phlegm from her chest.

Lapis seemed to be fighting back tears as she spoke. But she continued anyway.

"It was wrong, and I knew I was wrong, and...I'm not sure why I did it. Maybe it's just because I am a monster, now."

She pulled back the hammer on her pistol. Jasper, instead of struggling or fighting back or protesting, sat up with a curiously resigned, peaceful expression on her face.

"If I'm a monster," she said in a small voice, quiet but determined, "it's only because you people turned me into one!"

She fired a shot between Jasper's eyes. Then, after she fell, reflexively emptied the rest of her clip into Jasper's body.

After she'd done, she stood there, staring at Jasper for a long moment. Her body bloody and torn, but finally at peace.

And Lapis dropped the pistol to the ground.

She wanted to cry. Wanted to break down in tears. Wanted to run over and comfort Peridot and will her back to health. And then, maybe things could be okay.

But she didn't have time.

Because she felt a sharp, painful electrical current moving through her body, and screamed instead.

"What a mess," Aquamarine said, more about the mud on her outfit and the small smudge of blood on her cheek from Jasper's pistol than the carnage around her.

She stepped over Lapis's unconscious, twitch body, kicked Peridot over onto her back, then put her prod away and grabbed her cane off the ground, walking through the carnage nonchalantly.

"All of this makes it hard to do what we came here for," she said, lecturing her dead colleagues. "Oh well. Next time I'll come out with a proper team and tear the property apart..."

She heard a creaking noise and saw Greg standing on the porch, examining the scene in terror. He had Amethyst's gun in his hand, resting it against the railing, trying to work up the courage to use it.

"Oh, sorry," Aquamarine said cheerily, "I didn't see you there."

She drew her pistol and shot Greg, who fell backwards onto the porch with a thud.
Aquamarine took a step backwards, humming tunelessly to herself. Calmly taking in a deep breath of the morning air.

Overhead, the sun peeked through the fog.

Then she heard a growl, more animal than human. And felt something sharp strike her wrist. Her pistol went flying.

She turned, her face flashing angrily, and saw Pearl standing behind her, sword in hand.

Her clothes were completely soaked with mud and blood and pumpkin guts. Her strawberry hair was wild and fluttering in the slight morning breeze. An angry, vengeful fire burned in Pearl's blue eyes, all traces of humanity or happiness gone.

And Aquamarine practically smiled with glee.

_This_ was a Pearl Aquamarine had only heard about in rumors and vague reports and agency profiles. One that she'd longed to face directly.

"Shall we skip the preliminaries?" Aquamarine said, grabbing her cane off the ground.

"Fine by me," Pearl spat. "Either way, you're dead. And your mission is over."

"Hmm," Aquamarine muttered, examining her cane. "We'll see."

Calmly, she lowered the cane, pulled on its head...and revealed a long, thin sword concealed within.

Pearl's eyes betrayed a hint of shock, realizing now that the fight wasn't over...and hoping that she had enough energy left to fight.

"Not a regulation rapier, but it does the trick," Aquamarine said, spinning it with a flourish before standing _en garde_. "Now, shall we?"

Pearl allowed a grim, satisfied smile to cross her face, moving into her own stance.

"Challenge accepted."

Chapter End Notes

Hate to leave you in suspense, but I'll be back with the second half of the finale on Saturday! Without ruining anything, I would caution you not to assume for now that any characters are dead unless they're explicitly stated as such.
Dance of Swords

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 10, 1975

Pearl and Aquamarine began circling each other with their swords at the ready. Each daring the other to make the first move.

Aquamarine struck first, a tentative tap of her blade against Pearl's, evidently an effort to provoke her into action. They sparred for a few moments, clashing blades together harmlessly. Feeling each other out like opponents in a fencing match, not yet trying to hurt or kill their opposite number.

Pearl hadn't dueled an actual opponent in awhile, which made it difficult. Her strategy was simple, if cerebral: letting her opponent take the initiative so that Pearl could get a sense for their strengths and weaknesses, by their movements and tics and attempted maneuvers.

Of course, that was in a fencing match where actual lives weren't on the line. But Aquamarine was obliging her, so far, and she hoped it continued that way.

Pearl wasn't so worried about her injuries as it was before. Despite Jasper's blows, she could tell that the bleeding came mostly from her old injuries being opened up, rather than new ones. She was still a little stiff, especially when she had to bend left, but not enough to seriously inhibit her.

Aquamarine, on the other hand, had suffered a blow to her head, and that tended to be more impactful, even if it wasn't a serious injury.

Aquamarine had a very formal style, her footwork just as polished and precise as Pearl's own. But her swordsmanship wasn't especially good, Pearl thought. She would spar with Pearl for a moment, then make a sudden thrust or lunge when she thought Pearl had her guard down. Pearl easily detected a pattern in her movements, and was almost always able to parry or block her attacks without much difficulty.

On the other hand, her size and speed made her hard to hit. Any time Pearl made a move towards her, Aquamarine easily sidestepped the blade. Sometimes, as if to show off, she jumped in the air to avoid a blow. And any time Pearl became especially aggressive, as when she tried a quick succession of fleche moves, she would calmly step backwards, as if goading her to try again.

It occurred to Pearl that Aquamarine might be trying the same strategy that she'd employed during her own fight with Jasper. Allowing Pearl to wear herself down, letting the injuries she'd already sustained catch up to her, then make a move when Pearl was tired.

But Pearl was too full of adrenaline and rage to let that happen. She felt that, even if Aquamarine slit her belly open and she had to hold her guts in with her free hand, she would still fight until she was actually, literally, immediately killed.

After the first few minutes, the two women were still deadlocked, neither having scored a single hit on the other.

"I'm impressed," Aquamarine admitted, enjoying in a showy flourish of her blade. "Your footwork's great and your form is good. A bit slow on the blade, though." And she smirked as Pearl reacted angrily to that remark.
"Now we begin for real," she said.

Before Pearl could react, she threw two quick lunges at Pearl, then an upper cut. Pearl avoided the first two and parried the third, then Aquamarine directly struck Pearl's blade from the right side. Pearl blocked it, but felt the muscles in her left side seize up; her movements became stiff, and she seemed to bog down in her position. And Aquamarine detected this, waiting for the right moment to strike.

After a moment, the broke free of Pearl and quickly riposted, driving her sword off Pearl's blade and striking at her left side. Pearl cried out as Aquamarine scored a glancing blow to her side, just above her left hip. Pearl nearly lost her footing and swung wildly over Aquamarine's head, barely regaining herself quickly enough to parry a thrust straight on.

The fighting continued. Aquamarine clearly had the initiative, launching offensive moves with the occasional attempt to goad Pearl into an ill-advised attack. Pearl was disciplined enough not to fall for it, but she kept fighting off parries so much that it was impossible to land a blow. She suffered two more minor cuts from Aquamarine, and a strike from the flat off the smaller woman's sword, while failing to score a hit herself.

It was hard to catch up with the smaller, quicker woman. Harder still to maintain her form and footing in the sloppy, muddy mess underneath her feet. Pearl felt herself starting to feel stiff and tired; her moves become more formal and mechanical, more easily blocked or dodged by Aquamarine.

They locked blades below the waist, each woman attempting to strike a low blow. Pearl seized the opportunity; with a cry she used leverage from Aquamarine's sword to cut upwards, slashing across Aquamarine's chest and collarbone. The smaller woman cried out and broke off, raising a hand to feel the blood.

As she hesitated, Pearl moved forward again with a series of slashes. Aquamarine blocked the first, but a second one cut her across the face. Pearl saw a deep cut along Aquamarine's left cheek, and smirked in satisfaction as she pulled back.

Aquamarine struggled to contain her rage as the blood covered her face.

"Very good," she said coldly. "Excellent work, Pearl. But now it's my turn."

And with astonishing speed and anger, she moved forward, slashing her sword against Pearl's blade again and again. It was more angry blows than finessed strikes, but Pearl found it hard enough to block or to move out of the way. Aquamarine kept at it until she struck Pearl's left leg, just above the knee, causing her lose her footing. Aquamarine swiped high this time, giving Pearl a chance to strike back. Her thrust missed, but she managed to land the pommel of her sword in Aquamarine's chest, briefly knocking the wind out of her.

Pearl chivalrously broke off, allowing the smaller woman to regain her breath. She needed the rest herself to regain her footing and straighten up.

"Let's face it, Aquamarine," Pearl said haughtily. "You're not terrible at this, but you aren't especially good, either."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Aquamarine growled.

Pearl smirked, mixing pride with disdain. "You're quick, but you don't know what you're doing. Otherwise you'd have been able to kill a slow old bird like me by now."

Aquamarine took another moment to regain her breath. Then drew up again, barely restraining her
anger, and moving forward with a cry.

To Pearl's surprise, she actually leaped off the ground and kicked her in the stomach. Pearl cried out, feeling the blood flow again, and feel backwards with an "oof!"

Before she could stand back up, Aquamarine moved and slashed again. Pearl blocked a blow, holding the blade just over her face. Until Aquamarine twirled her sword around and struck Pearl's wrist.

Pearl gasped as she watched the sword involuntarily fly from her hand.

And out of her reach.

Aquamarine twirled her sword again, with the point aimed at Pearl's heart. She took a few deep breaths, enjoyed the look of shock and fear in Pearl's eyes, and a sadistic smile crept over her face. Her usual smugness returned, made even less appealing by the bloody cuts on her face and neck.

"Not a bad try," Aquamarine teased. "You almost had me worried. But I shan't drag this out and longer."

She launched a quick jab which pricked Pearl's shoulder before Pearl had the presence of mind to break free. She landed another kick into Aquamarine's midsection, which only seemed to make the small woman madder. She hacked and slashed, making a few more superficial cuts on Pearl's legs.

None of Pearl's wounds were that serious, but a million small cuts might be enough to bring her down. And now she didn't have a weapon, and might not be quick enough to dodge indefinitely.

She tried to stand up, but slipped in the mud and stumbled. Fortunately, so did Aquamarine as she came forward for a fatal blow, her sword blade sticking next to a dead pumpkin vine.

Pearl looked over towards her sword, at least five feet away...on the other side of Aquamarine. Getting it was easier said than done, especially without a weapon.

"Pearl!"

She turned and saw Peridot running towards her, with her hatchet in hand.

"Pearl, catch!"

Pearl watched Peridot throw the tool sloppily through the air. Wide off the mark. Typical.

Pearl steadied herself, then leaped in the air, just in time to miss another angry blow from Aquamarine. She grabbed the hatchet and used it to block Aquamarine's next few blows. Swiped at the small woman, missing her head by inches. She received a slight cut in the belly as Aquamarine thrust forward again, but knocked the sword down with her hatchet.

"Not very sporting," Aquamarine chided, upending the sword and sending the hatchet flying from Pearl's hand.

Pearl smiled and sidestepped her next blow easily. She held out a hand casually - and caught her sword by the blade. Aquamarine saw Peridot again, standing off to the side with a smirk on her face.

Aquamarine growled, not bothering to hide her frustration. She started hacking and slashing and thrusting with angry, unfocused fury, her blade becoming a blur of rage-driven steel.

Pearl knew she'd already won, psychologically at least. Aquamarine was completely losing her cool.
Even as she rained blows down on Pearl, it didn't bother her; these inelegant strikes were easily blocked or dodged, so long as Pearl could keep her footing. Which was no guarantee.

Pearl moved over into the grass, where the ground was a bit firmer. She backpedaled, easily blocking Aquamarine's attacks. Aquamarine grew more and more frustrated, more desperate, more angry as she went.

And, more importantly, more exhausted. More prone to mistakes. Easier to dispatch.

Aquamarine made another flurry of blows and cuts, resulting only in another superficial cut to Pearl's right leg. She blocked her opponents' blade, then quickly riposted, knocking Aquamarine's blade sideways, then cutting a deep gash in her left arm.

"Go Pearl!" she heard someone shout.

Pearl took a quick look and saw Peridot sitting in the grass cheering her on. And Lapis, still lying where she'd fallen, struggling to keep her eyes open as she watched. And they were holding hands.

Pearl smiled at that. Glad that at least some of her friends had survived...

She took another step backwards...and slipped.

And fell.

It took her a moment to realize what had happened. Even though it was obvious.

A rock.

A fucking rock.

All that finesse and skill and hard fighting and she was defeated by a fucking tiny pebble under her feet.

She landed hard on her back, staring up at the sky.

The clouds overhead started to clear, allowing patches of light morning blue to shine through.

And Aquamarine, still exhausted, still angry, but victorious by default. She allowed a triumphant scowl to cross her face.

"Almost had me worried," she said. Then she climbed on top of her Pearl, planting herself heavily on Pearl's injured stomach, and threw her own sword to the side.

"Now, Pearl White, I've had the great pleasure of fighting with you," she said, reaching into her vest. "And the even greater pleasure of defeating you. Now there only remains the duty of killing you."

Pearl watched as she drew her squadrissi dagger from her cloak. Held it up, watching the blade shimmer in the sunlight. Pearl saw a twinkle in Aquamarine's eye, then a strange, detached look, as if she'd been possessed.

She chuckled self-consciously, wiping a fresh trickle of blood from her cheek, then shouted out the lyrics to a long-ago, never-forgotten song:

"All'armi! All'armi!

"All'armi siam fascisti!"
"Terror dei comunisti!"

She raised the dagger high to plunge into Pearl's abdomen.

Pearl watched the blade descend on her...

Then heard Peridot yelling out again. "Hold on, Pearl!"

Aquadmarine was distracted just long enough for Pearl to reach over and grab her sword.

Peridot had started running towards the two of them, as if to tackle Aquadmarine. Only to trip over her own feet and fall flat in the mud.

Pearl squeezed her sword against her side, hoping that she could raise it at enough of an angle to strike her target.

"Oh please!" Aquadmarine growled, angry at being interrupted. "Enough silliness."

She turned back to Pearl, her face filled with rage.

"You people are the least serious 'freedom fighters' I've ever met," she said disdainfully. "Can't do anything right. Even die. What kind of losers are you, anyway?"

She raised her dagger again and prepared to strike.

Pearl tensed her arm against the ground.

"The worst kind of losers," she muttered.

Aquadmarine ignored her, starting to lower the blade.

"We are the Crystal Gems!" Pearl affirmed.

She managed to jerk her arm up quickly enough to beat Aquadmarine.

Aquadmarine let out a small, shrill squeak, like a balloon leaking air.

Pearl saw that the blade had penetrated her just below the heart.

Her eyes blankly in shock. The dagger dropped from her hands, the hilt harmlessly striking Pearl's thigh.

She managed to pull herself backwards, just enough to tear loose from Pearl's blade and stand on the ground. She staggered backwards a few steps, then fell flat on her back.

Pearl pulled back her sword. She sat up carefully, making sure Aquadmarine was dead.

Her eyes, staring blankly up at a passing cloud, provided Pearl's answer.

Pearl allowed a brief smile of satisfaction to cross her face. Heard Peridot and Lapis shouting congratulations towards her.

Then remembered Garnet. And Amethyst. And Greg.

And how tired and hurt she was.

The rush of everything caught up with her at once. Her head started to spin with disbelief and pain.
Her body felt weak, paralyzed.

And her head fell backwards, staring up at the sky, until she blacked into unconsciousness.

The last thing she heard was Peridot calling out her name.

Pearl slipped into a black void.

She couldn't tell if she was asleep or dead, or something in between. Strangely, it didn't concern her.

After everything she'd been through, fearing that her friends had died, she'd almost welcome it.

What did she have to live for?

She blinked. As if in answer, Rose materialized before her.

"Rose..." she muttered, reaching out to touch her lover's cheek.

"Hello, Pearl," she said, with that beatific, heart-melting smile.

"You're...you're here."

"I am here," she agreed. "It is wonderful to see you."

"I...I can't believe it." Pearl struggled not to cry.

"My Pearl...you haven't changed a bit."

"Well...that isn't entirely true..."

Rose chuckled. "Maybe...You seem less willing to have fun than you used to."

The accusation stunned Pearl, knowing she didn't have a real response.

"Well...how can I have fun when you're gone?"

Rose didn't answer.

"Even when you were with Greg, at least I knew you were there...At least I saw you sometimes...But now..."

Pearl looked down and sobbed. But then she looked up and felt a surge of elation.

"But now you're here! And I'm here! And we can be together again."

Rose continued smiling, but a sad wistfulness overtook her eyes.

"That would make me so happy," she said. "I've missed you so much..."

"And I've missed you," Pearl assured her.

Rose clasped her hand, and she gasped and felt her heart skip a beat.

"I've missed you so much," Rose repeated. "But there are other things to worry about."

"Other things?" Pearl asked, confused. "What are you talking about?"
"I was so unfair to you, Pearl," Rose said, her smile disappearing. "I wasn't faithful to you. I had affairs...even before I met Greg. I treated you like...like someone...I didn't realize how much it hurt you that I would stray...And you stayed with me. And I know I didn't deserve it..."

"Don't say that," Pearl said, frightened. "I didn't deserve you."

"NO!" Rose yelled, offended. "Don't you say that. I never deserved a wonderful woman like you. I always wondered what you saw in me, when I never really saw it in myself."

Rose turned away, crying.

Pearl took a step forward to comfort her. Then the meaning of Rose's words hit her with full force.

The affairs. The drugs. The untimely death.

The fear, the suspicion of a secret dark side that she'd never seen and still couldn't understand.

"I was never what I thought I should be," Rose admitted. "Never. Not once in my life. I couldn't be happy with myself, so I did my best to make other people happy. But...I only ended up hurting them more with...the way I acted."

Pearl rushed forward, stroking Rose's back as she used to do, so long ago. It seemed to work.

"I was selfish," Rose continued. "And I still am. I would love for you to join me, here and now. Help me feel less alone. Help me recapture something of what we had, with no consequences or shortcomings. Forever."

"Yes, of course!" Pearl smiled and nodded, quickly agreeing. "What do I have to do?"

Rose shook her head, still frowning. "All you have to do is stay. But that's not what you need to do."

"What?"

Pearl didn't understand.

"There is one person here who needs you," Rose continued. "Who wants you more than anything in the world. And if you stay, she can have you. But...if you go back, there are at least five people...and certainly more, who will need you much more than I do."

"Why would I go back?" Pearl seemed confused, even with Rose's explanation.

"Because you deserve to be happy."

Pearl stood back and considered this, not understanding at first. She wanted to tell Rose that she'd be happy here, with her. But that didn't seem the right answer.

Because she realized, on her own, what Rose meant. That she deserved to be happy...on her own. Without Rose.

Without merely being Rose's partner.

To be happy as Pearl White.

The simple, but profound truth in that statement shook her. She nodded.

"Thank you for letting me see you," Rose said. "I wish it could be under better circumstances..."
She opened her arms, and the smile returned. And Pearl rushed forward and gave her a deep, crushing hug.

"Will I see you again?" Pearl asked, tears pouring down her face.

"When it's time," Rose said, stroking Pearl's head. "When you're done living your life. When you're done being happy."

Pearl looked up at Rose. And all the sadness had vanished. All the remained was the smile.

"Looks to me like you haven't even started," Rose chided. "Now, promise me you'll be happy."

Pearl laughed uneasily and wiped away the tears. How could she say no to that?

"I'll try," she promised.

"That's all I ask," Rose said. "I know it's hard, but you deserve to be happy. In your life now. Never mind the next. You have too much living to do to worry about this."

Then Rose pulled away and winked.

"Besides, I'm not going anywhere."

And she started to disappear. Pearl reached out, but the vision was beyond her.

"I'll see you later, Pearl," Rose said as she faded to nothing.

Pearl was alone.

She wanted to sit down and cry, to remain in this void forever, alone with her thoughts and her sadness. But she felt Rose's words echoing in her skull, and vowed to pay them heed.

She knew that she had to go back. Or she could never face Rose again.

Chapter End Notes

Man, that was intense! Couldn't resist the obligatory Novecento reference. Not quite the end - there will be a few more chapters to wrap up some loose ends and determine character fates. Thanks as always for reading!
Truth

Chapter Notes

Wow, thanks for all the comments on the last two chapters! You guys are awesome. A few more chapters of falling action left to tie up loose ends and then this fic will be complete.

December 3, 1975

Washington, DC

"All right, Pearl," Peridot coached. "Remember what we talked about. We don't have a full house today and only Tower and Mr. Smothers are likely gonna give you any trouble. Senator Dewey will probably lob you some softballs like we talked about. Just answer their questions and if they give a chance to elaborate, elaborate. Your exhibits will be entered into the record when appropriate. Don't sweat anything. Don't give an answer that you weren't specifically asked. Don't incriminate yourself or answer outside the box."

"I still feel like I ought to have brought an attorney along," Pearl muttered, fidgeting with her necklace.

"Hey, I resemble that remark," Mr. Watkins said.

Pearl shot him a glare. "A real attorney," she clarified. "Not the guy who always bilks Greg out of his appearance fees..."

"You're confusing me with that prick agent Marty. I'm his personal attorney and I'm doing this pro bono because you're his pal and, let's face it, you don't have any money."

"Have you ever appeared before Congress before?"

"Of course not."

"Well, there you have it," Pearl said.

"I don't have to be here," he complained, wiping sweat off his brow.

"Pearl, focus," Peridot said, grabbing her. "We've practiced this a million times. It's gonna be an easy hearing if you just tell the truth."

Pearl nodded in affirmation.

"I hope I don't let you down," she said to her friend.

"You won't," Peridot said, offering a smile and a thumb's up. "Now, go get 'em."

She hurried out of the waiting room and into the hallway, while Pearl sat with Watkins, who officiously examined a piece of legal paper.
"I don't care what she says," Watkins said. "Based on the small snippets of things you and Greg have told me, your case is going to be a bombshell."

"I hope you're right," Pearl said uncertainly.

The previous day saw a former member of the Ku Klux Klan testify about FBI surveillance of white power groups with a hood obscuring his face to preserve his anonymity, lest his old pals murder him after the hearings. Short of engaging John Tower in a sword fight on the Congress floor, there was no way Pearl could top that.

In one sense, it was a relief. There wouldn't be too much pressure on Pearl to perform; a secretary and typist talking about wasn't the sort of thing to generate drama. On the other hand, who paid attention to the boring bureaucratic stuff anyway?

And that's what worried Pearl...that after all this, no no one would care. That her testimony wouldn't make any difference at all. That it would be a waste of time, and that everything she and the Gems had fought and almost died for that fall would amount to nothing.

But, she told herself, it's happening now. Might as well let it play out.

She had this thought when Stan Bayard, Peridot's young colleague, popped his head into the room.

"Ms. White, we're ready for you. Good luck."

Pearl nodded and stood up. Without even looking at her attorney, she hurried out of the room, straightening the lapel on her shirt.

---

It had been almost two months since the fight at the farmhouse. That time encompassed a lot of agony.

At first the entire gang seemed to be dead or dying, except Peridot and Lapis, whose injuries were relatively minor. Amethyst lost a lot of blood from her stab wound; Greg lingered near death with a bullet in his stomach; Garnet developed an infection and nearly died. And Pearl, it turned out, had lost a lot more blood than she'd thought in the heat of battle, besides more damage to her internal organs.

She woke up hours later in a small, empty room somewhere she didn't recognize. She was being attended to by someone she thought - she hoped - was a doctor, infusing her with plasma through a vein in her arm. And a few faces and voices she dimly recognized.

"Pearl, you're awake! Thank God! How are you feeling?"

A tall black woman greeted her as she regained consciousness.

"Like I've been sleeping on spikes for a thousand years," Pearl groaned.

"That's not too far off," the woman laughed. "Well, you're safe now, thank God, and so are your friends."

"My friends?" Pearl asked, sitting up.

"Easy there, easy," the woman said, gently pressing her down. "They are fine. Except for the man - Greg, I think his name is - they're all doing pretty well."

"And what's wrong with Greg?"
"Well, he was shot just below the heart. Bullet just missed his liver and came out the other side - amazed it didn't do any damage. But it's still, I dunno, 50/50 chance of living."

Pearl felt her stomach lurch and she laid back down.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Somewhere safe," the woman said cryptically. "We're in Virginia, that's all you need to know."

"But, who are you, and how did you know to...?"

"Well, my name is Bismuth, and this lug here..." she pointed a large black man in a leather jacket, a pistol strapped over his shoulder... "is my man Chris. We're friends of Garnet and Amethyst. Don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting you, though."

The two shook hands with forced awkwardness.

Pearl was still confused. "So, um, Garnet got in touch with you?"

Bismuth shook her head. "No, it was our mutual friend, Sapphire Blue. She knew where you guys were and sensed you were in trouble. So once I was ready to walk on my own two feet, Chris and me decided that we were gonna take a trip to Ohio to check you out. We were hoping to waste that limey bitch who messed me up, but...looks like you gals took care of that yourself."

Bismuth smiled and put her hands on her hips, clearly impressed at Pearl's feat.

"Well...we're alive, anyway," Pearl groaned.

"That's enough for now," Bismuth said. "You should rest. I'll see if Garnet and Amethyst and your other two friends want to see you in a little bit."

Bismuth left the room, followed by her husband. And Pearl laid back in her bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying to take in the improbable fact of her still being alive.

The hearing began easily enough, with Pearl answering basic questions about her career and her function at the FBI. Despite Peridot's warning, Senator Tower affected a courtly Texan air that prevented him from pushing Pearl too hard on any question of import. The other few Senators didn't seem too inclined to push her at all, least of all the Democrats, who seemed bored and exhausted by a hearing that dragged on and on and piled up mountains of evidence without, it seemed, making a lick of difference. They deferred to Fritz Schwarz, the Majority Counsel, who did most of the questioning and seemed determined to let Pearl talk.

Mr. SCHWARZ. Ms. White, what sort of operations were you made privy to in your position?

Ms. WHITE. Officially I wasn't made privy to any particular operations. I merely transcribed documents that came across my desk. But everyone in the Bureau hierarchy knew, more or less, who I was and what I did.

Mr. SCHWARZ. Fair enough. Maybe I can rephrase the question. What sort of operations did you...discover during your time in this position

Ms. WHITE. Basically, anything related to the counter-intelligence programs authorized by the Director during my period of employment in this position.

Mr. SCHWARZ. Did this include operations targeting New Left, antiwar groups?
Ms. WHITE. It did.

Mr. SCHWARZ. As well as civil rights, Black Power movements and so forth?

Ms. WHITE. Yes.

Mr. SCHWARZ. And also, I believe, the Ku Klux Klan and other white nationalist groups as well?

Ms. WHITE. Yes.

Mr. SCHWARZ. What priority do you feel the Bureau placed on these different groups? Which did they consider most important?

Ms. WHITE. I can only answer this question based on the files and memoranda that crossed my desk. I was not privy to Mr. Hoover's private thoughts or the deliberations of his innermost circle. That said, there was certainly a slant towards disrupting groups of a left wing persuasion over the right wing extremists in the documents that I surveyed...

And so forth. Pearl was poised and articulate, spoke clearly and effectively. She was as credible a witness as anyone the Committee had produced thus far. And she was quite photogenic, as she discovered to her mild embarrassment when Life gave her a full page photograph in their next issue.

Things went well until later in the hearing, when Senator Dewey took over. Pearl expected that, per Peridot's assurance, he would be an ally allowing Pearl to present her story and bring out some hard truths.

It only took a few moments before Pearl realized how wrong she was.

*It broke Pearl's heart to see her friends.*

*Garnet greeted Pearl in a bathrobe, walking with a cane. She looked disheveled and exhausted and had lost weight. She compensated by adopting an unusually haughty, defiant attitude.*

"It will take more than two bullets to kill the truth," Garnet told Pearl with a broad grin. "Of course, they did a number on me..."

*Amethyst wasn't much better.*

*Her hair had been cut short, and her shoulder was bandaged in a sling. She still evinced her usual energy, but her tone seemed meek and subdued, like a frightened child.*

"Hi P," she said, sitting with a towel over her shoulders. Apparently she'd been showering.

"Amethyst," Pearl muttered, rushing across the room and hugging her.

"Good to see you, too," Amethyst said, patting Pearl on the back. "Man, you look pale."

"Don't I always?" Pearl asked, instinctively raising a hand to her cheek. Noticing how ice cold her skin felt. And blanching.

"Truth," Amethyst assured her. "But hey, you're alive! And Perry tells me that you kicked Aquamarine's prissy little butt single-handed! That's awesome!"

"Well, I'm glad you think so," Pearl muttered. "It had to be done."
"Yeah, but you did it in style, I'm sure," Amethyst laughed, trying to regain her bonhomie. "Nobody kicks butt like you, Pearl."

"If you say so."

Pearl couldn't say more. She was still wracked with guilt over her sword injuring Amethyst...even if it wasn't her fault. It didn't matter.

She broke down crying and fell into Amethyst's arms. And the shorter woman didn't know how to make her feel better.

Senator DEWEY. Ms. White, are you familiar with a group called the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI?

Ms. WHITE. The name sounds familiar. Could you refresh my memory?

Senator DEWEY. Perhaps I can rephrase the question. Are you familiar with the Media burglary on March 8, 1971 of secret FBI documents?

Ms. WHITE. Yes.

Senator DEWEY. How did you find out?

Ms. WHITE. Like most people, I suspect I learned about it from reading the newspaper.

Senator DEWEY. You had no foreknowledge of it.

Mr. WATKINS. I would like to object to this line of questioning as immaterial.

Senator DEWEY. I think this question is germane given the subject matter. Ms. White is testifying about her knowledge of covert FBI programs and many of these programs were exposed through this burglary. I would also suggest that Ms. White's credibility is vital to her testimony.

Senator TOWER. I will allow my colleague from Delmarva to continue this line of questioning...bearing in mind that Ms. White is not on trial here.

Mr. WATKINS. Very well.

Senator DEWEY. Ms. White, did you have foreknowledge of this break-in?

Ms. WHITE. Of course not.

Senator DEWEY. Were you acquainted with anyone involved with the break-in or this group, the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI?

Mr. WATKINS. Mr. Chairman...

Ms. WHITE. I do not recall the names of any of the individuals involved. Perhaps if you know the names I could attest to them.

Senator DEWEY. Of course, you are aware that the FBI has no clue as to the identity of the burglars...

Ms. WHITE. Precisely.
Senator DEWEY. I apologize if my questions seem accusatory. I'll ask this instead. Were you aware that the FBI used this office in Media to house files related to the COINTELPRO investigations?

Ms. WHITE. Yes.

Senator DEWEY. How many people would you say were aware of that location?

Ms. WHITE. I would be guessing.

Senator DEWEY. Well, if you could estimate for us.

Mr. WATKINS. I would advise my client not to answer that question.

Senator DEWEY. Would you say that a lot of people knew about that location, or only a few?

Ms. WHITE. That would depend on what you would consider a few...

"Pearl, I am so sorry. This is all my fault."

Peridot didn't bother to hide her agony. Lapis sat in the corner fidgeting nervously with her fingers, reluctant even to face Pearl.

"This isn't your fault, Peridot," Pearl assured her. "Project DIAMOND would have happened whether or not you got in touch with me. Don't blame yourself. Besides, I couldn't have survived without you, you may recall."

This made Peridot smile sadly. Then she grabbed Pearl in a hug.

"I'm just so happy you're alive," Peridot said sincerely.

"And I'm glad that you're all right," Pearl assured her. And she looked over at Lapis, and smiled at her.

Lapis shot her a weak thumbs-up, a reserved half-smile. And Pearl decided not to press the matter.

That left Greg. Who was still unconscious in a room all his own, being attended to by a woman who seemed to be a nurse.

Pearl sat next to him and clutched his hand for a moment, allowing all the sad, remorseful thoughts to swim through her head. She remembered her vision, or dream, or whatever it was that featured Rose, and hoped that Greg had a place in her future.

He had to. Especially after all that he'd been through. After all the progress they'd made over the past few weeks...

Pearl couldn't think of anything more to do or say, so she broke away and kissed the back of Greg's hand. Then walked out the room...

And caught sight of herself in a mirror as she left the room.

She gasped, seeing how pale and gaunt she appeared. How weak and frail.

She almost passed out, then and there. But then collected herself. And reminded herself that, for now, being alive was achievement enough.
Senator DEWEY. Are you aware of a group known as the Crystal Gems?

Ms. WHITE. Excuse me?

Senator DEWEY. Are you aware of a group known as the Crystal Gems?

Mr. WATKINS. What is the relevance of this question?

Senator DEWEY. I'm interested in exploring the witness's personal connections and social circles.

Mr. WATKINS. Why is that relevant to the questions being asked?

Senator TOWER. Senator Dewey, I will allow you to ask this question. But bear in mind, the witness is not on trial.

Mr. WATKINS. Very well.

Senator DEWEY. Ms. White, what are the Crystal Gems?

Ms. WHITE. The Crystal Gems...are a group that was organized by a friend of mine. A friend named Rose Quartz, who passed away two years ago.

Senator DEWEY. And what did this group entail?

Ms. WHITE. It was more of a discussion group. We talked about current events, social issues, and things along those lines.

Senator DEWEY. Did it partake in any subversive or criminal activities?

Ms. WHITE. We discussed current events, social issues.

Senator DEWEY. Did it partake in any subversive...

Mr. SCHWARZ. Senator Dewey, you have your answer. Please move on from this question.

Senator DEWEY. Very well.

---

"Pearl, it is wonderful to meet you at last," Sapphire said. "Garnet speaks so highly of you."

"And you," Pearl said, a little awkward at meeting her. "Umm, thank you so much for helping us."

"I feel that I owed it Garnet," Sapphire said. "We have been friends for so long, and been through a lot together...And any friends of hers are friends of mine."

"Hmm. Well, Garnet certainly picks some interesting associates."

"I agree," Sapphire said. And the two of them smiled at each other, sharing a private joke.

Pearl was surprised at how easy it was to get along with Sapphire. She had a very calming, gentle way about her that instantly put Pearl at ease. That made her seem much warmer than her huckster psychic persona would suggest.

"Will Greg be all right?" Pearl asked.

Sapphire shook her head. "I'm not sure. He has a chance, and that's more than I might have thought. It's a small caliber bullet so it could have done a lot more damage."
"Hmm. Well, that's why I hate guns."

"True, guns are awful. But it's much easier to kill people with them!"

"I suppose," Pearl said. "But also requires much less skill."

"I don't suggest you try telling Garnet that," Sapphire said.

"I have," Pearl said.

"Well, I have to leave," Sapphire said. "Bismuth and her husband will watch you until I get back. You can rely on them."

"I'm glad."

"And Pearl..." Sapphire stopped just as she was about to leave.

"Yes?"

Sapphire stared her in the eyes and allowed a warm, mysterious smile to cross her face.

"Rose wanted me to tell you that you made the right choice."

"Pearl, I am so sorry!" Peridot said to Pearl as she left the hearing room. "I don't know...I have no clue what happened!"

Pearl was furious, and refused to look her in the eye as she led her into an anteroom. She felt angry and betrayed. She had been ambushed. And Peridot would be the easiest target to take it out on. The easiest one to suspect.

But she seemed so flustered, so upset herself, that Pearl dropped any suspicions. Besides, Peridot couldn't be that devious; couldn't maintain a front of deception that long. And to what end?

Still, she was furious.

"How would he even know about the Crystal Gems?" Pearl demanded. "Somebody must have told him about that."

"It wasn't me!" Peridot exclaimed, waving her arms in terror. "I never mentioned..."

"I know it's not you," Pearl said, not in the mood to comfort Peridot. "But someone gave him that information."

Peridot was pacing again, driving Pearl nuts.

"Sit down, Peridot," she snapped. Peridot ignored her.

"Of course! It has to be that clod Stan! I've never trusted that guy, and he connections out the wazoo..."

"Well...maybe," Pearl said, thinking and trying to ignore Peridot's frantic movements. "Or...he is a Senator."

"What does that mean?" Peridot asked.
"Senators can be bought or intimidated, too," Pearl said. "Especially if they have something unpleasant in their past. I don't know about Senator Dewey in particular..."

"He's just a little small town Mayor, Pearl," Peridot said. "Kind of a doofus, definitely in over his head, but..."

"Well, that could be it. Someone offered him a chance to be a big shot, and discrediting one of your best witnesses was the cost."

Pearl smiled, almost relishing the deviousness. "Goldwater or Tower might do it out of principle, but they're Republicans. People would expect. But a liberal Democrat attacking a witness against the FBI...that would be something spectacular."

Peridot felt a little uncomfortable and sighed, deflated. She finally sat down next to Pearl and stared at the table, looking crushed.

"My whole life has been a lie," she pouted. "Sorry, Pearl."

"I wouldn't say that," Pearl offered. "I mean, everything you've done, you did for the right reasons. And...there's definitely something to that."

"Wow, thanks." Peridot smirked, but didn't look up.

The two of them sat there for a long moment, until Peridot asked what both of them were thinking:

"Now what?"
December 4, 1975

Senator Dewey reached his office early, already exhausted by an early rise and a long DC commute. He sunk down in his chair and fiddled with a pencil on his desk, wondering how he'd possibly get on track.

He barely had time to think about this before Stan Bayard entered.

"Peridot's here to see you, Senator," Stan said.

"Not yet," Dewey said, sighing. He was dreading this confrontation, and hoped he had enough energy to stay awake through it. But he wasn't yet ready.

"Then when...?" Stan asked. "I mean, it is Perry..."

"I'm meeting someone first thing," Dewey said, pressing his hands against his temples. "Look at my Rolodex, I don't remember his name. Probably a contributor or something...But yeah, give Peridot a seat and I'll be with her when I can."

"Okay...I'm not sure how much she'll wanna wait..."

"After the stunts she's pulled, she's lucky her ass isn't in the street," Dewey snapped. "Now please."

Stan seemed surprised at the Senator's outburst, but nodded and left the office.

Dewey continued looking down at the desk until the door knocked.

"It's open," Dewey said.

And a large, middle-aged man in a gray suit entered.

"Senator," he said.

"Mr. Rohrbacher," Dewey greeted him, standing up, smiling stiffly and shaking his hand.

"I know you're a busy man but I just wanted to stop by and congratulate you on your performance yesterday."

"Oh, I just asked some questions that needed to be asked," Dewey responded.
"Nonsense. You put that tall, snotty dyke in the hot seat yesterday," Rohrbacher laughed. "Made her look like the lying, criminal bitch she is in front of millions of Americans."

Dewey just nodded blankly.

"Anyway...I'm glad we had your support yesterday," Rohrbacher said. "And our friends thought you earned a reward..."

"Choice of committee spots," Dewey said, not really interested. "Maybe a new overpass outside Beach City? God, wouldn't that be nice..."

"Well, we can work on that," Rohrbacher said agreeably. "But right now...something for your trouble."

He tossed a manila envelope on Dewey's desk. The Senator saw a round bulge in the middle and his heart sank.

A bribe.

A fucking bribe.

Dewey just stared at it, stunned and ashamed and feeling sick to his stomach. Looked up at Rohrbacher's fat, leering face, a wall of contempt hidden beneath close-shaven jowls and carefully practiced bonhomie.

"Anyway...thanks again, Senator," he said, his voice taking on a darker tone. But the smile remained, and made Dewey wretch.

He nodded as Rohrbacher showed himself out. And opened the envelope, a bit curious to see what the Powers That Be thought a Senator was worth...

"Senator, I don't think I can restrain Peridot any more," Stan said. "She just kicked the leg off a chair."

"Oh Lord," Dewey said, rolling his eyes. "Send her in. I'll see what I can."

Sure enough, the little blonde burst into the room, with an imperious, defiant air that put Dewey's teeth on edge.

"Senator, I know what you're about to say..." Peridot began, swinging her fist and struggling to contain her voice, until he interrupted her with a wave of her hand.

"Perry, I don't think you do," Dewey said, bidding her to sit down. She remained standing instead, a bit calmer, hands folded over her stomach. Dewey looked at her, noting the defiance in her eyes, and sighed.

"I'm sorry for letting you down yesterday," he muttered, looking away.

Peridot's mouth dropped open. "Excuse me? You're sorry for...?"

This threw her for a loop. She was expecting to be called on the carpet, not...whatever this was.

Dewey nodded. "Perry, let's not beat around the bush. You spent weeks developing Pearl White and prepping her...evidently at no small risk to yourself, or her for that matter. And I let you down yesterday. I put her on the spot. I am...so sorry."
Taken aback, Peridot didn't know what to say. Dewey didn't seem sad or upset, just resigned and tired by what he said.

"I didn't want this committee assignment," he complained. "It was thrust upon me. So mostly I've been sitting there and just listening to other Senators ask questions and their witnesses talk. So I looked for a way to stand out and...guess I did."

He grabbed a newspaper off his desk and pushed it towards Peridot. Peridot saw *The Beach City Bugle* with a front page picture of Dewey, looking like a tough prosecutor and a headline: **ROOKIE SENATOR GRILLS WITNESS**

"Beach City's Pride," he said ruefully, walking over to the window and looking out into the city. "I'm a small town politician, Perry. And I wasn't even that good of one. God knows I know fuck all about how to run a country. How the hell did I get roped into this?"

"People called in favors," Peridot said, allowing sympathy to slip through.

"Well...I'm not much of a Senator," Dewey admitted. "And I don't think I'm playing one on TV very well. Keep getting calls and messages from our constituents telling me I need to do something if I'm going to be on the committee any more. And you know our state's...conservative with a tiny liberal tip. Just enough to get me in office. So you can guess what the correspondence looks like..."

Peridot nodded, still guarded as she waited for the shoe to drop.

"But anyway...You did a good job. I was a bit peeved that you didn't tell me what you were up to, but...I suppose I can understand why you did it. You've always had a flare for the dramatic."

"I'd like to think I had a flare for the competent," Peridot huffed. Though she didn't really mind; she was discovering new things about herself all the time.

"Either way...it was great work, but...not what I want from an aide. Peridot, I'm removing you from my congressional staff..."

And there it was.

"What? Senator..." Peridot began to protest.

"...And I'm insisting that you return to Beach City and manage my affairs there."

Peridot's protest caught in her throat. Another surprise.

What did this mean?

"Senator..." she began.

"Perry, I think you're great. I've always liked you, you know. But I don't think pushing paper around and answering phone calls from lobbyists angry grannies is really your style. I think you'd do much better running my personal organization. I mean, Ms. Trickett misses a lot of time now that she has kids, and...I figure it...might be best for you to leave DC for awhile."

Peridot blinked, twice, realizing what he was saying. Realizing it was a warning.

"That, uh, might not be a bad idea," Peridot admitted, her mouth suddenly dry.

"I know you wanted to be involved with the hearings," Dewey said. "But I think this is a better fit
for your...skills. Besides, you'll have a lot more free time, and a lot more resources to...look into things for me."

Peridot wondered what *that* might mean. But it was clear Dewey wasn't willing to spell everything out.

Maybe he *was* a good politician after all.

"And to that end..." He reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a roll of money, passing it to Peridot.

"This should help you get started," he said.

Peridot leafed through the bills, counting it with trembling hands. Her eyes widening with excitement and disbelief as she totalled the amount in her mind.

"There's...$50,000 here," Peridot sputtered. "Are you sure...?"

"It's yours," Dewey said. "You can use it for help sprucing up the office. Or...whatever use you see fit to make of it. I trust you."

Peridot nodded and pocketed the money, too afraid *not* to take it. Wondering what the Gems would say.

"Well...thank you," she said, still in shock.

"Now, if you want, you can spend a few more days here to settle accounts, but I'm sure that you're excited to get started on your new job."

The two stared at each other, something unspoken transpiring. Peridot felt a strange warmth, a feeling of respect towards Dewey that she hadn't had before entering her.

"You are a better Senator than you think," Peridot muttered.

"No, I'm not," Dewey chuckled. "Maybe some day...but not yet."

"Hmm. Well, I think I'm gonna get going..."

She started to leave, placing a hand on the doorknob. Then, before she went, she had to ask something:

"How did you know about the Crystal Gems?"

"Word gets around," Dewey said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "Especially when your friends do the things that they do."

Peridot nodded in affirmation, allowing a small smile to creep across the corner of her mouth. No doubt that he knew now.

"Senator, thank you," she muttered as she left, closing the door behind her.

Senator Dewey leaned back in his chair, feeling a little satisfied, a little upset. But at least he felt like he'd done the right thing, for once.

"Senator." Stan Bayard interrupted his thoughts.
"What is it?"

"Senator Church wants to know if you'll be in committee today."

Dewey sighed and started to sit up. Then stopped himself.

"Is he?"

"Don't think so."

"Well, the presidential primaries start in a few months," Dewey muttered acidly. "Guess that matters more to him than uncovering intelligence abuses."

He shook a pencil absently, then threw it down on the desk.

"No, I have a few constituent meetings I've been putting off. I'd prefer those for a change."

He and Stan exchanged smiles, and the young aide exited the room.

---

"I don't have any clue where he got this kind of money," Peridot said, showing the money to the disbelieving Gems. "But here it is."

"Did he say why he was giving it to you?" Pearl asked skeptically.

Peridot shook her. "Said it was for my discretion...in case we needed it to...look into things."

"More epigrams," Amethyst said, blowing a raspberry. "Lame."

"And he wants me to move back to Beach City," she said.

Silence greeted this.

"Hmm. So he wants us to work for him." Garnet said this less as a question than an observation.

"Garnet, I know how you feel about the Government..." Peridot said.

"No, it's not that," Garnet insisted. "I don't see any problem with our having a sponsor, especially if it's someone who can protect us. I just worry that it's an unnecessary complication. Someone else they could use to get to us."

"What's the saying?" Amethyst said, scratching at her bandaged shoulder. "Don't look a gift Senator in the mouth, or something? Garnet, he just gave us $50,000. And God knows we need money if we're gonna keep doing this thing. Or even if we just want to go into hiding for awhile."

"Plus we can't go back home," Pearl reminded them. "The apartment was wrecked. Trashed. Someone had been there while we were out. Police, FBI, who knows. And they're expecting us to come back."

"And, I hate to say, but none of us are exactly in fighting shape right now," Amethyst said.

Garnet, who still needed a cane to walk, pondered this sadly. She didn't like feeling weak or defenseless, but she didn't relish the idea of being dead either.

"Plus, there is a lot that we can do without, you know, running people through with swords," Pearl said. "We can still investigate and track and find out what things are being done and expose them."
Besides, we'll have a new home base, out of harm's way..."

"Where?"

Pearl looked at her as if the answer were obvious.

"Beach City, of course."

This surprised Garnet and Amethyst, who exchanged a glance.

"Uh...Pearl, are you sure you'd feel comfortable going back there?" Amethyst asked.

"Why not?" Pearl said. "I made my peace with Greg...At least, I think I did. Plus, I'm sure he'll need a place to stay and recover."

"Greg's still weak," Garnet said. "The doctor said he'll live, but it will be awhile before he's able to move around at all."

"Guess you're right," Pearl said. "And I'm not sure how far this money will go even if we take it. Between the medical bills and the housing..."

"Well, it's a start," Peridot said. "I'm not gonna do anything...outrageous to get you guys new money. But there are ways..."

Garnet smiled. "Your revolutionary girlfriend could expropriate some funds for us, if need be."

"Garnet!" Pearl snapped. "That is not funny."

"I don't think Lapis is up for anything like that," Peridot insisted, a little insulted.

"Calm down," Garnet said. "It's a joke."

"Aww man, I was lookin' forward to trying out my bank robbing skills!" Amethyst teased. "I've seen Bonnie and Clyde, like, 500 times by now..."

"Amethyst, they die at the end of the movie," Pearl reminded her.

"So what? They're cool!"

"Death is too high a price to pay for coolness."

"That is one woman's opinion."

"Amethyst, don't make me smack you..."

And they bickered a little more, though Peridot stayed aloof, watching and feeling warm.

Feeling a little dangerous.

But more importantly, feeling like she finally belonged somewhere.
For anyone who missed it in my previous fic, I wrote an article for another site examining Lapis Lazuli’s characterization throughout Steven Universe, and particularly reading her as a character with mental illness. If you read it, I’d love to hear your thoughts. https://the-avocado.org/2018/05/08/steven-universe-why-lapis-lazuli-matters/
December 31, 1975

Jones Bluff, DV

"Peridot, what are we doing way out here in the country? I thought we were meeting Pearl and the rest at the beach for New Year's."

"We will, there's still time. I mean, the Sun hasn't even set yet."

They careened down a small, slippery back road, the only one between Beach City and Jones Bluff. It had barely been plowed after the previous week's winter storm, and was still slick with slush and ice and mud despite a few days of mild weather.

"What's so important it couldn't wait until tomorrow?" Lapis asked, a little peevishly. "I was gonna stay inside where it's warm and watch the Peach Bowl until..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you were so invested in college football."

"I'm not, it's just I'd rather not die in a car wreck on New Years' Eve. Although, in a weird way it would be kinda perfect..."

"Lapis," Peridot sighed as the car swerved wildly around a sharp corner, "you really need to have faith in me."

Lapis raised an eyebrow. "I have faith in you, but not your driving."

"What a fine distinction."

The two had been living together off-and-on for the past few months. Peridot kept her apartment in DC while she searched for a place to live in Beach City, staying in hotel rooms and occasionally with the Gems, where Lapis took up temporary residence.

Peridot considered living with the Crystal Gems, who purchased the beach house back from the traveling couple (befuddled and bemused as they were by the damage it had incurred) and set up shop there. But she decided that she wanted her own place. It would be too crowded with that many people there. And she figured Lapis might not be comfortable, either.

And after a year living in DC, Peridot, at least, wanted a change from city life.

It wasn't until a few days earlier, just before Christmas, that Peridot found something just perfect for both of them.

"Here we are!" Peridot sang as the car bumped over a rock in the road. Lapis jolted up in her seat, nearly hitting her head on the ceiling.
"Jesus Christ, Perry," she said, ducking her head down to avoid more unpleasantness.

The car rolled to a stop. Peridot hurriedly bolted out of the car before Lapis could react. Lapis finally looked up and gasped.

Peridot had found a large farmhouse in the countryside.

Lapis stared incredulously at the building as she

"Perry, it's...Wow."

"I know! I kept thinking about where I wanted to live, and I figured...I've been in one shitty apartment or another pretty much since I'd left high school. Then I talked to Greg, who knew a real estate guy who was selling old farm properties out this way. And he got someone to take me out here and take a look around! It's great! Our own expanse of farmland, just twenty minutes from Beach City! Nice and isolated yet close enough that it's not a chore to travel."

Lapis didn't know what to say.

On the one hand, she loved the idea of having her own farm with Peridot. And the place looked beautiful; a large house, a small barn attached, and several large fields and groves, though dead and dotted with slush in the winter.

On the other, the memories of Ohio seemed inescapable. She was already having a hard time moving past what had happened, another violent nightmare in a lifetime full of them. And this...didn't seem like a good fit.

What was Peridot thinking? Lapis wondered. She can be sweet, but also thoughtless. And sometimes both.

"Uh, Peridot..." Lapis started to object as they walked onto the porch.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Peridot enthused. "Man, I can't believe I got this for a down payment of only $5,000! That's practically a steal for property this value!"

"Did you, um, maybe think that this might not be the best place for us to live?" Lapis wondered.

"Well, it's not perfect," Peridot admitted, missing Lapis's point. "It's...the middle of winter, so there aren't gonna be any crops around. But!"

And she reached under a chair nearby. Pulled something out. And turned towards Lapis, tightly holding a small, round orange object in her hands, smiling with exaggerated pride...

Lapis gasped as she recognized it.

Their little pumpkin from Ohio.

Lapis snorted and burst out laughing. And Peridot's smile turned into an uncertain smirk.

"Wow, that's...that's really...something special," Lapis said, struggling to contain her laughter. Peridot seemed a little chagrined at her reaction.

"Well, *I* certainly thought so," Peridot said with deadpan seriousness.

"Why on Earth would you keep that?" Lapis asked, examining the pumpkin. Mostly she was amazed that it hadn't rotted or fallen apart over the past few months.
"Because it's something special," Peridot repeated, pulling the vegetable back. Lapis cocked her head to one side, not understanding.

"That farm...when we arrived, it was all dead. All leaves and rotting vegetables and ruined furniture. No one had lived there for years. I doubt anyone wanted to live there. And...I mean, we kinda made it worse...that day."

Her voice gained a tone of severe gravity as she spun the pumpkin around slowly in her hand, regarding it. And Lapis stopped chuckling as Peridot continued.

"But this little guy...somehow, it survived. Amidst all that neglect and death and suffering...something like this. Something small and fragile and...beautiful. It just seemed very...hopeful."

Lapis nodded. She finally understood. And her heart was touched.

She leaned in and kissed Peridot on the forehead. Peridot blushed and looked away, then held the pumpkin out to Lapis as an offering. The taller girl grabbed it and cradled it in her arms like a child.

"Well, we wouldn't want to lose something so special," Lapis cooed. "Let's keep it inside."

Peridot smiled. "I was hoping you'd say that."

She led Lapis inside, and showed her around the farmhouse. Small but cozy, with a large kitchen, a small living room (no TV or radio installed just yet) and a little bedroom sandwiched in between. Already furbished, as if Peridot had been carefully organizing it over the past few days.

Knowing Peridot, she probably had been.

"I'm not thinking we keep livestock or anything," Peridot said, rambling on. "I mean, I've had rotten luck with dogs and cats and, hell, goldfish! You know I killed four goldfish in two months when I first graduated college? It's like I'm a master of disaster."

"You're gonna have to fight me for that crown," Lapis teased, smacking Peridot on the shoulder.

"Maybe," Peridot growled, before resuming her cheerful tone. "But anyway, we could still grow some crops in the spring! Corn, wheat, flowers...maybe even some new pumpkins! I mean, I love this little guy but he's not gonna last forever..."

"Peridot..." Lapis said, grabbing her wrist to stop her. She sighed.

"What's wrong? You don't like it?" Peridot asked.

"No, it's perfect," Lapis admitted. "I mean, I have to admit, I wasn't sold on the idea when we first got up here, because...well, you know...too many memories. But..."

She grabbed both of Peridot's hands and led her to a table in the kitchen, where they sat down.

"Perry, you know what I am now," Lapis said. "You've seen what I am. And besides that, you know that I...have problems. I mean, even if they leave us alone, even if all the spies in the world are dead and gone, all the Aquamarines and Jaspers and Topazes and...I'm not fixed. You're gonna recognize that...trauma doesn't just go away...And I'm gonna need a lot of help."

She seemed on the verge of tears, but managed to control herself.

"Anyway...I have to ask again. Are you sure this is what you want?"
Peridot didn't hesitate before answering.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

The answer melted Lapis's heart. The two stood up and embraced, swaying back and forth in the middle of the room for a long moment.

"Well, let me ask you something," Peridot whispered back.

"Hmm?" Lapis leaned in.

"Are you sure that I'm what you want?"

Lapis seemed taken aback by that question. Then she looked up and saw Peridot looking away, ashamed.

"Perry..."

"I mean, you know who I am, right? I'm fussy and nerdy and awkward and... And I'm no good in a fight. I don't know how much help I'm gonna be if..." And she stopped herself, not wanting to complete the thought.

"I can take care of myself," Lapis assured her. Then she added: "As long as I have someone really strong like you backing me up."

Peridot made a weird groaning noise and hugged Lapis again, squeezing her as tight as she could.

Lapis practically choked on her own emotions. She patted Peridot on the back, then let a smile spread across her face. A real smile.

Finally, for the first time in ages, she felt like she was home.

At least, until she remembered something else.

"I'd love to stay here and hug you...forever," Lapis said, stroking Peridot's hair. "We'll have plenty of time for that, I guess. But for now, there's something I wanted to get done today. And thanks to your little surprise, it looks like we're not gonna have a lot of time to do it."

Peridot pulled away, fixing her glasses and looking halfway between ashamed and anticipatory. Then she cocked an eyebrow and asked:

"What did you have in mind?"

Lapis just smiled.

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**Beach City, DV**

"Wow, Lappy! I didn't expect to see you in a blue mane!"

"Thanks, Amethyst," Lapis replied, flourishing her freshly-dyed, shimmering hair.

"Perry, your girlfriend is the coolest," Amethyst continued.

"I'm not entirely sure that I approve," Peridot admitted, holding her partner's arm close. "But it's her hair..."
"It is my hair," Lapis affirmed haughtily, poking Peridot's nose. "And don't you forget it."

The two joined the Crystal Gems, and Greg, on the beach, along with a few other Beach City residents. They sat on towels with pots and pans, waiting for the New Years fireworks to start.

It was a cool night, but warm enough that they couldn't see their breath in the cold. Most of them made due with sweaters and scarves, though Garnet wore a heavier brown jacket, more likely out of personal style than necessity.

"Well, either way I'm glad you two could join us," Pearl said invitingly. "And Lapis, I assume you'll be moving out soon?"

"Pearl," Amethyst said, smacking her. "Way to be rude."

"No worries," Lapis assured them. "I'll be moving in with Perry right after the New Year. That is, if she's okay with it...?"

"Okay with it! Why wouldn't I be?" Peridot's face lit up, making Lapis's heart melt.

The two kissed. Amethyst made a loud "awww!" sound and banged her pans together, Garnet smiled approvingly, and Greg and Pearl exchanged approving glances.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're up and around, Greg," Peridot said when she and Lapis pulled apart.

"Well, it's kinda touch and go," Greg admitted, rubbing his stomach. "It still hurts like hell, ya know, and I think the bullet messed up my...But, I mean, there's no way I'm missing this."

"We couldn't have a Crystal Gem party without our token dude," Amethyst said.

"Umm...thanks?"

"Token or not, Greg, you're an important part of the team, and we wouldn't want you anywhere else," Pearl chimed in.

"See Amethyst," Greg said, "that's how you give a complement."

Amethyst blew a raspberry and kicked some sand in Greg's direction. Garnet stifled a laugh.

"Still getting into trouble, huh Greg?" someone said.

The Gems looked up to see a tall, striking woman with a round face and unruly blonde hair standing over them.

"Vidalia, you made it!" Greg said, pulling himself to his feet and shakily hugging her.

"Couldn't miss the chance to catch up with my favorite musician," she said. "Got your phone call. Sorry I couldn't make it sooner, had to make sure I found someone to take care of Sour Cream."

"Ladies, you remember Vidalia?" Greg said.

"I...believe we've met," Pearl said.

"Yeah, I remember you," Vidalia said coolly. "Rose's friend, right?"

"...Something like that."
"Hmm. Garnet, how's it going these days?"

"The usual," she said guardedly.

"Guess so. And Amethyst, you still modeling?"

"Hey, you remembered!" Pearl and Garnet exchanged a confused glance.

"I do a little painting, I'd be honored to have you as a subject."

"Hey, any time you need someone!" Amethyst said. "I mean, it's not like there are a lot of top-notch artists around Beach City..."

"Well," Greg said, "I know one..."

It took Lapis a long moment to realize he was referring to her. Then she blushed with surprise.

"Oh! Well, artist, I dunno...I used to paint..."

"No kidding?" Vidalia asked. "That's cool. My name's Vidalia, like the Onion. Vidalia Barnes."

"Lapis Lazuli, like the stone." They shook hands.

Vidalia laughed. "Yeah, I sense a rock theme with you guys."

"Gems," Pearl muttered.

"But yeah, what sort of stuff did you paint?" Vidalia asked.

Lapis shrugged. "Just, you know, landscapes and still-lifes, nothing too exciting."

"Hmm. Well, I was living in Richmond but my boyfriend's thinking of moving up here. Wants to be somewhere on the shore, I guess, he works as a fisherman. But anyway, enough about that! You said used to paint. What made you stop?"

Lapis shrugged. "Dunno, it just...lost its appeal."

"Well, if you have any talent I really don't think you should let it go to waste," Vidalia said.

"That's what I've been saying to her," Peridot teased.

Vidalia laughed, then looked at Peridot and Lapis, who were holding hands. "This your girl?"

They pulled their hands apart in a panic and froze up.

"Hey, no judgments," Vidalia assured them. "It's 1975, not...or 1976, I guess."

"Yes, this is Peridot, my...girl."

Peridot felt happy to hear her say that, and a dumb smile burst across her face, overcoming her reticence.

"Umm...yes. I work for Senator Dewey," she sputtered. Lapis chuckled at her awkwardness.

"No kidding? That's swell." Vidalia said. "Man, I must be getting old coz I'm talking like my parents now...But anyway. I'm thinking about setting up an art studio in town here, but I might need some people to help me out."
"That's cool," Lapis said. It took her a moment...

"Oh, are you asking me?"

"Why not? I'd love to see what you have."

"Yeah, Lapis!" Amethyst said. "Do it!"

"I don't know..."

"Hey, as someone who has no discernible talent, I strongly encourage you to use whatever you might have."

"I dunno about that, Amethyst," Greg said. "I mean, your cooking is pretty good."

"Any time you stay away from the burgers and fries and all that disgusting greasy food," Pearl said, wrinkling her nose at the mention of grease, "you do have culinary talent."

Garnet nodded. "I liked your chicken," she said simply.

Amethyst blushed and chuckled nervously, not believing the praise.

"Yeah, okay, whatever, you guys," she blurted out. "Maybe you're right, but it's not like I'm gonna open up a chain of restaurants or anything."

"Put it on the bucket list," Greg said. "I mean, we still have a good amount of this money to blow, and it is a New Year...something to think about."

"Definitely," Vidalia agreed. "Listen, 1975 was a pretty shit year for me, but I've been trying to take stock over the holidays, y'know? I have a boyfriend, I have a kid I love, and now I came into enough money that I might be able to do a job I like, too. So, I'm gonna start from there and see where 1976 takes me."

"That would be wonderful," Peridot agreed. "We should all be so lucky."

Pearl thought for a long moment. And then looked to Greg.

"You know, towards...the end, Rose talked to me a lot about wanting to open a restaurant in Beach City," she said.

"Yeah, she mentioned it more than once to me, too," Greg reminisced. "Dunno why, she wasn't the greatest cook."

"No, she wasn't," Pearl admitted. "She couldn't cook a grilled cheese sandwich."

"Yeah, but it was a dream."

"It was a dream," Pearl agreed, deliberately stilting her words. "It was her dream."

Pearl smiled, hoping that her expression could give Greg the idea.

"Well," she said impatiently when he didn't respond, "we have some money, and a very talented cook, and...some people in need of things to do. And it does look like the Crystal Gems will be out of commission for awhile..."

Greg nodded again. He got her meaning, this time.
Their conversation was interrupted by fireworks exploding overhead, illuminating the beach in dozens of different colors.

Garnet and Amethyst enthusiastically banged their pots together; Pearl did hers more quietly and reluctantly, hating the noise but enjoying the camaraderie. Greg settled for clapping his hands and shouting while Vidalia laughed.

Peridot and Lapis just leaned back on their towel and watched, with Lapis burying her head in Peridot's shoulder. Peridot stroked her blue hair, convincing herself she could get used to it. It was an even brighter blue than the star shells, she thought.

Watching the fireworks ring in the New Year, far removed from Washington and Aquamarine and everything else awful that had been dogging them, they all experienced something they hadn't felt in a long, long time.

Hope.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for reading! After writing a couple of downbeat fics, I wanted to return to a happy Lapidot story. We should be coming up on the end very soon!!
 Pearled woke up to a nice late spring day, the kind of immaculate morning she could only see at Beach City. The Sun glowing over the ocean, a slight breeze ruffling the sand. The first bustloads of summer tourists starting to arrive, swarming the boardwalks and crowding the beaches. And making business.

As she got dressed, she looked at her prized picture of Rose and herself, one of the few pictures she'd saved from the Gems' DC apartment. Stared at longingly for a long moment, then with a sort of comfort. She could move on with her life. Rose would always be a part of her, something she couldn't escape, but her memory seemed less painful now.

She knew she'd lived out part of Rose's legacy, as best she could. They'd retrieved the Family Jewels and given them to Congress, the press, anyone who printed everything. Unfortunately, they made only a minor stir. The CIA was no longer news. Frank Church saw his presidential campaign go down in flames, to be replaced as front-runner by a no-name peanut farmer named Jimmy Carter.

With the Bicentennial about a month away, and an election in the fall, nobody wanted to think about government misdeeds any longer. It was all about patriotism and a sense of pride and renewal. Moving on from the sordid past of Watergate and Vietnam and intelligence abuses and endless hearings.

Pearl felt more than a little resentful at this outcome. The Jewels that they'd fought so hard, and risked so much for seemed like academic interest. She tried to justify it to herself - better that people know, it's not our fault that they won't do anything with it - which helped only a little. Which didn't make the resentment go away.

At least it helped in some concrete sense. Three awful people were dead (as much as Pearl, and the other Gems, hated killing, she could admit that a world without Aquamarine and Jasper and probably even Topaz was a better place); she and Lapis and the rest could move on with their lives and not have to live with the government looking over their shoulder.

Hopefully. There was no guarantee of that. She and the Gems still weren't fully physically recovered from their ordeal, all these months later. The scars on Pearl's stomach were still deep and red and likely to be permanent. And she still found it difficult to bend her body too far to the left, making her wonder how much that might inhibit

Now, she thought as she forced a t-shirt onto it was time to carry out another one of Rose's wishes. One she resented a bit more.
She went downstairs and saw Greg and Amethyst eating breakfast, sloppily shoveling cereal in their mouths.

"Hey Pearl," Amethyst said through a mouthful of Fruit Brute. "Gotta pick up a shipment of sauce for the restaurant before we open. Who knew that hot sauce would be so popular?"

"On tacos?" Greg asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Guess you're right," Amethyst replied. "Still, hot weather, hot sauce..."

"That's what sour cream is for."

"Greg, I like the way you think!" Amethyst chortled, dribbling milk all over the table.

"Amethyst," Pearl reflexively muttered, rushing forward to clean up the mess with a tissue.

"Already looks pretty crowded out there," Greg said. "Saw a whole busload of people come in just after dawn. Talked to the driver and he said they were coming from Philadelphia."

"Guess they got tired of Jersey," Amethyst said.

"Them and me both." Greg rolled his eyes.

"Well, the summer rush has started," Pearl said, putting her hands on her hips. "This is the first summer we've had at the restaurant, and we've got to make a good impression. Our food is fine, our service is adequate, but we need everything to be exceptional to keep business steady."

"I'd say our food is better than fine," Greg grumbled. "We have dozens of repeat customers..."

"Which is fine when it's March and the only people coming in are the locals," Pearl replied. "But we're going to have hundreds, maybe even thousands of people coming through town every weekend. A few regulars aren't going to cut it."

"Pearl...seriously, relax!" Amethyst urged. "It's gonna be fine. People aren't looking for the most amazing food in the world, just something that'll make them full between swimming and shopping."

"I mean, it's pretty much impossible for a restaurant to fail around here," Greg added.

"Okay, fine," Pearl said. "But that doesn't mean...I mean, this is Rose's place. What would she think if...?"

"Rose would want us to have fun and enjoy ourselves," Amethyst interrupted. "I mean, this restaurant was her passion, not an obligation that she felt she needed to do."

"Hmm, I guess you're right," Pearl said, sighing. "I just want our place to be...as good as she'd make it."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Garnet said, walking downstairs.

"Teaching again today, huh?" Amethyst asked.

"Just today and tomorrow," Garnet said. "They're thinking about offering me a full-time position next year, so I have to make a good impression."

"You'll do fine, Garnet," Amethyst said.
"Besides, if you don't - and you will," Pearl added, "you'll always have a place working for us."

"Good to know," Garnet said, smiling slightly as she walked out the door.

"Come on, Pearl, grab something to eat before we head out," Amethyst said. "We're gonna have a busy day. Now we've got time to relax and, you know, chat."

Pearl looked at Amethyst and Greg and sighed.

"Rose would certainly like me to relax," Pearl admitted.

"That she would," Greg nodded.

Pearl sat down but didn't make herself any food. She just took in the scene around her, listening to her friends talk trying to make the most of their time before work.

It was peaceful, she admitted, and despite the strangeness of the arrangement, she realized that she could enjoy life again, even with the hole in heart missing.

*Time doesn't heal all things*, Pearl thought, *but it does make them easier to manage.*

And she smiled at that thought, as Amethyst told Greg another awful joke and he laughed and spewed coffee out his nose.

This time, Pearl didn't bother to scream or clean up their mess. She was just happy to be here.

Happy to be happy again.

---

Peridot wished she could enjoy her arrangement.

Everything was in place for her to be happy. She was working an easy job on a decent salary. She was living with the love of her life in a house (not an apartment...a house!). Now that she was working for Senator Dewey, she'd gone from hopeless girl nerd to important young woman whom everyone, even if they didn't like her, at least held her in respect. She was still young and had her life. What was there to dislike?

But somehow, it didn't click. Her mind *needed* to be engaged with things greater than shmoozing and shaking hands and remedial politico scuttwork. She still wanted to do more substantial stuff; shaping policy, helping people who weren't rich donors and town fat cats.

Making a difference. Being *important*.

She wondered whether her exile to Beach City wasn't a punishment after all, despite the Senator's secret sinecure and his honeyed words.

Still, she thought, there was Lapis. Who seemed together. And that almost made it worth the aggravation.

"What are you working on today?" Peridot asked, watching Lapis remove the cover off a canvas.

"Oh, just a little private piece," she said mysteriously, a smirk crinkling around the edges of her mouth.

"Private? Not something for the studio?" Peridot asked.
"Oh, no," Lapis said. "Not anything like that."

Anything like that? What did that mean?

"...Something I'm gonna regret wanting to know?" Peridot asked carefully.

Lapis snorted and giggled, a sound which made Peridot's heart skip a beat. Her laugh was much lighter and playful than it been before. But it didn't really relieve her anxiety.

"Maybe if I show it to someone else," Lapis said, admiring her handiwork with the same mischievous smirk.

It made Peridot swoon - and drove her crazy.

"All right, Lazuli!" she growled. "Let me see..."

"It's not quite finished yet..." Lapis protested.

"Lazuli, you can't taunt me like this and then not expect me to be curious..."

"I want you to be curious," Lapis said, "but not to see it until..."

But Peridot pushed her aside to look at the painting. And her jaw dropped open.

It was a painting of...them.

Embracing each other.

In the nude.

"Oh my..." Peridot couldn't say anything more. She was too mortified.

"Told you it wasn't done yet," Lapis said. Peridot hadn't even noticed that the painting stopped at their waistlines.

As if that was her objection.

"Jesus Christ, Lapis!" Peridot yelped. "You haven't shown this to anyone, have you? Have you let Vidalia see this? What about Amethyst? Holy shit, if Amethyst sees this..."

Lapis's face burst into a wide, teasing grin, not even bothering to hide her enjoyment any more.

"No, just us," she said.

"Thank God," Peridot muttered.

"You've gotta admit I'm getting better at this," she teased her partner. "I didn't even paint from life, and yet it came out looking so real..."

"Maybe too real," Peridot smirked, trembling with rage and embarrassment as she examined the painting closely. "I mean, did you really have to paint the mole under my right breast?"

"Why not? It's one of those little realistic details that tells you, this isn't an idealized figure, it's a real person who lived."

"And had a mole under her right breast."
"Exactly."

"Well, at least it's not full frontal," Peridot harrumphed.

"I thought about doing that," Lapis admitted, "but I'm still terrible at perspective. Can't draw people facing towards me, you know? Plus it would be kinda creepy."

"Whereas seeing yourself painted in the nude isn't creepy at all!" Peridot growled, looking like she was about to explode.

"Peridot, I think you're missing..." Lapis said, trying to calm her partner down. "Look, I'm sorry you're hung up on the mole, but there's a reason it's there. I mean..."

And she pointed haltingly to the paint of her own arm. Peridot saw, amidst the light olive skin tones, a deep pink blotch of paint.

Peridot gasped.

The scar on Lapis's wrist. If anything, it was bigger on the painting than it was in real life.

"I wanted this to be real," Lapis said, suddenly serious. "I mean, to capture us in this moment...how we were...who we are...when we're starting out and still confused and trying to make things work...And still getting over everything...But we're still happy and in love. It's warts and all. Or, moles and all. Or, scars and all..."

Peridot's mouth dropped open slightly. She felt all the anger within her deflate instantly.

"Besides," Lapis continued, trying to regain her jocular tone. "We're gonna be together for a long, long time. And we need to remind Old Lapis and Old Peridot how hot we are right now."

Peridot smirked. "Lazuli, I don't know about you but *I* plan to stay hot forever."

Lapis broke into a loud belly laugh. "You dork!"

Then she grabbed Peridot around the midsection and pulled her to the ground. The two lay there, looking up at the painting and laughing their heads off for a long time. Then they stopped, and hugged, and kissed each other several times.

Then they heard a noise. Looked up, and saw someone slip an envelope through the mail slot in the door. Then heard the footsteps racing away.

They froze. Peridot moved first, heading slowly towards the door. The two lay there, looking over at the cabinet where she kept her pistol but unable to move.

Peridot was too afraid to open the door. Instead, she reached down and grabbed the envelope off the ground.

It wasn't marked. No address, no postage, no writing of any kind.

Peridot slit the top open with her fingernail, afraid of what she'd find inside.

Lapis slowly edged over to join her as Peridot pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. There was a typewritten message, short, vague, but tantalizing...

"PROJECT DIAMOND=TERMINATED"
"CARACAS-SANTIAGO=UNDER CONDOR'S SHADOW"

"VIVA LA LIBERTAD"

Peridot's eyes widened as the implications sunk in. Fear, trepidation, and not a little excitement crossed her face.

She didn't have to understand all, or even any of it to lodge an educated guess. And she could tell, from Lapis's reaction, that she understood too.

Their time with the Crystal Gems wasn't over yet.

Chapter End Notes

And finally we come to the end of this very long story. I left a sequel hook in case I come back to this, but I'm not sure if or when that will happen. (There are ideas, both in and out of the SU canon, that I'm interested in exploring in the meantime.)

Thanks to everyone who read, followed, left kudos and especially my reviewers. I'll give a special shout out to the readers who reviewed almost every chapter: BreadboiX, Dreamland_B, Master of the Boot, WhatHappened and Without Name. Without you, this story might never have made it past the first few chapters.

As I've mentioned before, I'm hoping to rework this story into an original novel in the near-future. I'd be happy to have any advice on doing so, or assistance in revising the work. If you're interested in helping, please leave a comment below and we'll figure out how to get in touch soon.

If not, thanks anyway for taking a chance and reading this story. It means so much that you did!

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