Connie Swap Episode 33: Notes from the Undergrounded

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Summary

In the wake of her and Steven's big reveal, Connie is grounded. So very grounded. But she still gets to see Steven. And go on missions. And play Lutes and Loot with Peedee and Jeff. It's weird, but so is her life. Regardless, she and Steven have to navigate more than a month of her being weirdly grounded. It's tricky but hopefully the two of them can talk some sense into the gems, all while the gems try and talk some sense into them.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter Notes

In case you're curious about the inspiration for the title or the promo art...

Also note that Connie's rebuilt TV isn't actually that large or... twisty; that's a fun bit of artistic license to enhance the Dostoevsky comparison.

Also, this episode is going to be organized a little differently than the others. This is a vignette episode, similar to Ep5, Ep16, and Ep24, but it covers quite a longer span of time than any of those. Also, not all of those vignettes are going to fit into a single chapter, so you'll see chapters with a 'Part 1' or 'Part 2' in the name to let you know how they're grouped.

Vignette #1 will start before vignette #2, which will start before vignette #3 and so on. However, the vignettes each explore a theme that comes up during Connie's grounding and some of those themes cover more days than other. So vignette #2 might start on September 17th and end with a scene from October 1st even though vignette #3 starts on September 20th. Hopefully it'll all make sense in context but I wanted to point out the difference since it's a departure from how we normally do things.

However, there is a Timeline of Events for this episode that you can check out if you ever want to. You'll want to be mindful of spoilers to future chapters, but it's there if you want it.
Peridot and Lapis were running errands and would later be in space working on fixing a sixth doom cannon. Bismuth had been gone all morning, saying she 'had something special' she needed to work on at the forge. Jasper was on patrol, with Wolf tagging along for walkies. Steven was in class.

Connie reached out with the indescribable sense that accompanied her colored perception ability. She felt nothing and didn't turn see-through: if there was anyone around, they weren't thinking about her. She was alone.

With a contented sigh, Connie stretched out in bed and flipped through the channels on her rebuilt television, luxuriating in familiar surroundings and comfortable solitude.

It was her first full day grounded.

Though there was no one to enforce it just then, Connie was technically forbidden from leaving the Beach House. She had the run of the house, the temple, and the sky arena but everywhere else required gem supervision.

She knew sooner or later (probably sooner) this state of things would chafe but right now it felt good to be back: in her own bed instead of crashing at her dad's apartment, eating Peridot’s cooking instead of crashing at her dad's apartment, eating Peridot’s cooking instead of someone else’s, with the familiar glimmer of the warp pad to one side and that faint splash of yellow over the doorway in her peripheral vision. Plus, she had two hearing aids again, Peridot having finally replaced the one that had been shorted out during the launch.

It was good to be home.

Mary opened the box of sheet music, idly humming along to Steppenwolf's *Magic Carpet Ride* playing over the house speakers. As she began separating and shelving the new inventory, she could hear the faint strains of guitars from upstairs. Normally instrument lessons took place in the living room but the mayor's son had gravitated toward her husband's mellow room, claiming 'it reeked of creativity... and Febreeze.' That room was where the band posters that weren't for public viewing lived, but Buck was old enough it wasn't a concern.
She was about halfway through the box when a two-second clip of *Sing, Sing, Sing* announced someone entering the Universe Instrument Shop, School of Musical Instruction, Recording Studio, and family home. Mary set her work aside, smiled, and turned around. "Hello. Is there- Oh."

Mary looked in surprise at the svelte, blue-skinned woman standing in her doorway. However, habits honed by years of performances meant she recovered swiftly, saying, "Hello Lapis. Please, come in. It's nice to see you."

Whether that last part was true remained to be seen, but Mary wasn't about to leave someone standing on her doorstep.

Lapis looked a little distracted, staring off into the distance before focusing on Mary. She had a lazy grin on her face. "Sorry. Just remembering me and Dot cutting it up to that tune back in the 30s. Also makes me hungry for cookies for some reason." The barefooted gem stepped in and followed Mary to the living room, claiming the loveseat for herself.

Mary chuckled. "Ah, yes. Steven used to call that the cookie song because of those Chips Ahoy commercials. I think we have some in the pantry; I can bring you some if you'd like."

Lapis nodded *chipperly*. "I wouldn't turn them down." She cocked her head, taking in the strains of guitar music upstairs. "Is Stevie around right now?"

"No, he's in class." Mary paused on her way to the kitchen and gave Lapis a slightly wary look. "Why? Do you need to speak with him?"

Her guest shook her head. "Naw, just you and Gregiverse. Want to give you two the skinny on some things."

Mary stepped out of sight just as Steppenwolf gave way to Nirvana’s *Come as You Are*. She assembled a tray of cookies and assorted snacks --Lapis had quite the appetite as she recalled-- as well as a pitcher of sweet tea and a trio of glasses, all while a sense of unease built like a slow crescendo in the music of Mary's soul.

The Crystal Gems were wondrous, literally out of this world, but they had a habit of bringing trouble, or at least drama, with them. Mary had long felt conflicted about the colorful women of Beach City even though their adoptive daughter was practically family to the Universes.

All this she kept behind a hostess’ grin as she set the tray down on the coffee table in front of Lapis. "Greg is upstairs with a student right now. I'll just be a moment and see if he can come down."

Lapis, already halfway through a chocolate chip cookie and humming the big band tune, nodded, obviously content to wait.

A brief exchange later and Mary was descending the steps with her husband in tow, her hand having found his for support. Buck, back in the mellow room, had been told not to 'fret the frets' and keep practicing; he seemed unphased by the disruption though Greg promised to make up the time when he got back.

"Hey Lapis," said Greg as they stepped into the living room. "Heard you had something about Shtu-ball or Connie to talk about." Husband and wife found their way over to the couch.

Sitting in front of a noticeably emptier snack tray, Lapis finished her sip of iced tea and somehow hovered the tea, glass and all, back over to the coffee table. She gave the pair a wan smile, idly brushing crumbs off her shorts. "So, Con-con got herself grounded but she couldn't have done it..."
Mary drew herself up straight, shoulders square, the same position she used when talking with recording industry lawyers. "What were the two of them doing?"

Lapis started to reach for another cookie then stopped herself. She chuckled silently at her own behavior and then sank back in her seat, alternating her gaze between Mary and Greg. "Hey, so remember Hiddenite over New Years?"

"You caught them fused?" answered Mary, simultaneously surprised and not surprised at all. Teenagers were never as discreet (or, in this case, discrete) as they thought they were.

It was a beat later before Mary realized Greg and Lapis were looking at her: the former, perplexed, while the latter was leaning forward, her expression intent.

"How long have you known?" asked the blue gem.

Mary reached out and gave her husband an apologetic squeeze on the leg. "Since early August."

"so the twins steal a car and my colleague doesn't even find out until he gets a call from the police," says Priyanka, holding open the apartment door for Doug. "The Los Angeles police."

Doug, carrying the books and journals that tailed after the doctor wherever she went, had been about to reply but that last detail prompted, "What? Really?! They joyried all the way to the west coast?" He blinked. "Joyrode? I'm unsure of the conjugation there."

Priyanka chuckled and shook her head, shutting the door behind him. "Whatever the case, they left quite the trail of vandalism in their wake. But here's the most surprising thing--" but she had to pause because her phone beeped at her.

During the months he and Priyanka had been dating but before Doug had been willing to admit that was what they were doing, he'd been surprised to learn that doctors gossiped. It wasn't just Priyanka; he'd accompanied her to enough hospital events over the last eighteen months to know that it seemed to be a profession-wide penchant. And not only did they gossip, but there was so much to gossip about. He'd always assumed the grind of medical school would produce aggressively level-headed people, the sort who cared about golf and made a point to drink each week however much red wine was supposed to be good for your heart, no more and no less.

Priyanka was certainly an eminently practical person, not staid but hardly swinging from the chandeliers. But to hear her tell it, the rest of the hospital staff with 'M.D.' in their title were a tawdry reality show waiting to happen.

She pocketed her phone and gave him an apologetic look. "Nothing important," she explained. "Where was I?"

"The surprising thing about the twins," finished Doug as the pair began to walk down the stairs, Priyanka looping her arm through his. He wasn't sure but he suspected that some part of her, possibly some vestige of her school girl days, really liked it when a boy carried her books for her.

"Ah yes. It turns out the twins are named 'Lapis' and 'Lazuli,' boy and girl, respectively." She smiled as Doug's jaw dropped.

"That can't possibly be their-" Doug shook his head as the pair approached her sedan. "Really? And this is Doctor Gero's kids? The, uh, the oncologist with the bushy, white mustache?"
"Actually, Gero's speciality is orthopedic surgery, hip replacements and the like, but yes," and she gave Doug a cheeky grin, "he does have very prominent facial hair." She opened the door and scooted into the driver's seat.

"And two teens with a record." Doug whistled, handing the books down to her, then leaning in and giving her a quick kiss. "There must be something about that name that means 'trouble maker'. Anyway, I'll find out about..." and Doug trailed off as he saw through Pri's passenger-side window a green figure approaching.

Priyanka gave him a confused look, then followed his gaze over to where Peridot was walking over, the gem looking serious even for her.

"I'll call you later," he said in a soft voice, Priyanka nodding back and closing her door. She gave Peridot a modest wave, double checked her mirrors, backed carefully out of her parking spot, and drove slowly out of the lot and onto Thayer Street.

"Peridot," greeted Doug.

"Hello Doug," answered Peridot, approaching to within about five feet and then stopping. They stood there in awkward silence for a moment.

"Can I help you with anything?" Doug asked eventually.

"Yes. Or rather, no," clarified Peridot. "That is, I am not here to request aid or materials but rather to inform you of recent... happenings." She fidgeted. "With Connie."

"Is she okay?" he asked quickly. He'd had nightmares that started this way.

"Oh, yes, her physical and emotional well-being appears within one standard deviation of baseline," said Peridot hastily. She looked around the parking lot. "Perhaps we could return to your dwelling and discuss matters there?"

Doug swallowed and he was suddenly hoping the pitcher of lemonade in the fridge wasn't empty. "Sure."

Sadly there was less than half a glass left so Doug filled it the rest of the way with water and stirred it. It'd be terribly diluted but at least this way he wouldn't run out of things to do with his hands mid-talk. He sat down at the dinner table across from Peridot and gave her a 'go ahead' look.

"As you are no doubt aware, Connie returned to the Beach House recently, intent on sharing her discoveries over the last several weeks." Peridot's gaze moved into the middle distance and a faint grin found its way onto her face. "She made a number of very compelling points across a wide range of topics; she has grown into quite the passionate and intellectually capable being."

Doug sipped his drink and smiled back. "She has. She's brighter than I was at her age and much more diligent. Braver too. Thirteen-year-old Doug would have turned back around the second that magical wolf took him to a ledge somewhere in the Andean mountains."

Doug sipped his drink and smiled back. "She has. She's brighter than I was at her age and much more diligent. Braver too. Thirteen-year-old Doug would have turned back around the second that magical wolf took him to a ledge somewhere in the Andean mountains."

Peridot nodded. "And it's difficult to accept that she is only two months removed from her fourteenth birthday. Subjectively I feel like she should be younger than her first decade still, which is preposterous given the obvious progression of time between then and now but-"

And Doug finished where Peridot started, saying, "But it's a surprise every time you look and she's not six." Another sip. "I know how you feel." He gave a casual shrug. "Pri says it never goes away,
you just get better at hiding it."

A beat later and it was clear the feeling of camaraderie that had bubbled up had just as swiftly popped. Peridot drummed her floating fingers on the table. "Yes, how is your, erm, new partner doing?"

"She's well." Doug took a big drink of his weak lemonade. "There's a conference in Kansas City she may be attending in November." A pause. "Not until after Connie's birthday, fortunately."

"Oh, yes. That's good." Peridot's eyes wandered the apartment as if seeing it for the first time. "She seems... healthy." Another pause. "And I've heard far fewer complaints from Connie in recent months regarding Dr. Kurunthottical, which suggests a measure of acceptance, or at least resignation, at her continued presence."

A little later Peridot gave a grin that completely failed to reach her eyes.

"You said there was something that happened with Connie?" asked Doug, getting the conversation back on track with all the finesse and subtlety of a hippo on roller skates.

"I did, yes. Erm," Peridot met his eyes for what was possibly the first time since coming inside. "A necessary preamble is ensuring you were aware of Connie's relationship with the Steven becoming... romantic in nature. This is a fairly recent development."

She looked like she'd bitten into a lemon. Wait, Peridot liked sour food. She looked like she'd bitten into a lemon that was fifteen and dating Connie.

Doug took another large drink and realized he'd finished the glass. That certainly didn't bode well. "I'm aware, yes. They seem happy together," he said, his chest tightening as he spoke, the words came out a little strained.

"Agreed. That is consistent with the elevated serotonin levels I've detected between them in recent scans." She may have been drumming her tethered fingers but it was hard to tell with just the two. "And Lapis is overjoyed at the development." Peridot's chin found its way to her palm at that statement.

Doug blew out a long breath. "You don't have to tell me about that. I was stop number one on her little rainbow tour around town." He looked out the window at, yep, there was that rainbow, and glared at it briefly. "It's- I'm happy for them."

Peridot nodded woodenly. "Yes. As am I. Another sign of Connie's waning childhood."

"Steven's a good kid," added Doug.

"Quite so."

There was an element of rising pressure to the silence, like that moment in a submarine movie when everyone pauses, breathless, waiting to see if the bulkhead ruptures. Peridot twitched, her mouth quirking into something that was half grimace and half something worse.

Then the bulkhead ruptured.

"THAT PUBESCENT HAS BEEN FUSING WITH OUR CONNIE!" she shrieked, rising to her feet and looming over the table.

"WHAT?!" shouted Doug, startled on multiple levels just then.
"Connie and- and- that boy have been fusing. FUSING! For months! Right under our very noses and they had the temerity to announce it via their fusion during the post-reunification debrief!"

"I- But-" Doug ran a hand through his hair as he raised what turned out to be an empty glass to his lips. "I thought humans and gems couldn't fuse?!"

"They can't! The very concept is absurd! But-" and by this point Peridot had shoved free from the table and was pacing, limb enhancers thrown skyward, "-nevermind logic, or precedence, or any of the literature surrounding children. Or gems, for that matter! No! Just because something is impossible and unspeakable, it can still happen to our Connie! Just throw all the literature out the airlock because our child is the exception to ALL THE RULES!"

Doug hadn't had nightmares like this specifically but he was pretty sure he would be starting tonight.

"How did this happen?!" he hadn't intended to shout, exactly, but that seemed to be the only volume available to him just then.

"I don't know!"

"Are they okay?!" Still shouting.

"Nominally!"

"Are you okay?!"

Peridot rounded on him. "No! I'm not prepared for this, Doug!"

"Who could be?" he said, this time only at a moderate yell. At some point he'd stepped clear of the table himself and was now vying with Peridot for room to pace.

"Precisely!"

In an abrupt motion Peridot pivoted and then collapsed into the reading chair that Priyanka and Connie had been using regularly. The gem was splayed out, her tech-feet or whatever she called her metal boot thingies resting on their heels, her limb enhancers draped limply over the arm rests. "Why is anticipating the impossible seemingly a requisite for successfully raising Connie to maturity?" she muttered.

Peridot's lassitude spread to Doug who paced over and dropped unceremoniously onto the nearby couch. "If it helps any, I don't think anyone really knows what they're doing. And the other parents don't have the excuse of having a magically powered puberty to contend with."

A moment stretched out, then Peridot grumbled almost too softly to be heard, "I can assure you I find that cold comfort indeed. I am merely too demoralized to outwardly express it."

Doug nodded. "Yeah." He slumped further into the couch. "Yeah," he repeated.

There was the ticking of a wall clock and a choking miasma of parental frustration. Nothing else.

"It used to be easier, right?" asked Doug an eternity later.

Peridot nodded sluggishly. "Very much so. Connie was quite tractable until roughly eighteen months ago."

Doug's expression became thoughtful. "Recent, terror-inducing developments aside, Connie's a
"really good kid." He licked his lips then sat up ever so slightly, using an arm draped across the back of the couch for support. "Nature and nurture are tricky to tell apart, but however much of that is nurture is eighty-five percent because of you."

The green parent across from him shifted in her seat a little and blinked owlishly. "Out of curiosity, how would you apportion the remaining fifteen percent?"

"Ten percent Jasper and ten percent the young adult section of the library."

"That totals greater than one hundred percent." She cocked her head to the side. "Also, it excludes Lapis and you."

"We're the remaining negative five percent," said Doug with a rueful laugh. Then he shook his head and said, "No, that's not fair. Lapis has done her part too."

Peridot nodded absently. "She has." Then she focused on Doug. "And you shouldn't dismiss your own contributions. Connie's fiduciary needs were met quite satisfactorily and that was almost wholly-"

Doug waved her off. "A dad should be more than an account balance."

The silence from the reading chair was damning.

Finally, gently, Peridot said, "You have been a substantial source of emotional support and happiness for Connie in the wake of her most recent birthday. No one can earnestly deny your efforts or influence since then."

The clock continued to tick but the miasma cleared a little.

"To bring up a salient example," and Peridot was for some reason cringing at herself, "you were a shelter for Connie during recent events which left me... ill-equipped to act in my usual role." A beat. "Thank you for returning, Doug."

Doug, with great difficulty, as if the conversation itself had aged him, hauled himself upright. "And thank you for staying."
--- September 17th---

Steven was chatting with Peedee --Jeff had to run back and grab something from his locker-- not really paying attention as he moved in the direction of the bus when something wet tickled his ear.

"Wah- Hey!" he shouted, half laughing and half startled. Wearing hearing aids for pretty much his entire life and then suddenly not meant he was a little odd about his ears, or so Steven suspected. He touched his ears all the time, had little flashes of worry that he'd lost or forgotten his hearing aids probably ten times a day, but when someone else touched his ears it was shocking and he was still undecided if it was fine or something he should politely ask people to please not do.

It had been months since his picnic with Connie in Lighthouse Park and some stuff he was still trying to figure out.

He turned expecting to see Jeff grinning at him. Instead-

Steven jumped a little in surprise.

"Hi Lapis. You surprised me." He found a smile for the gem as a finger went to squeegee out his damp ear.

Jeff jogged over and whispered something to Peedee who whispered something back. Then Jeff made a five point scans of the area while Peedee fished his G.E.M. whistle --'Give 'Em rooM' visible in fine print along the side-- out of his pocket because monsters happened and gems happened and one usually came with the other. The mayor had even given a presentation about it in class once. There had been charts.

"No one expects the Lapish Inquisition," Lapis joked back.

Steven chuckled. Then a thought occurred to him that made his heart beat a little faster. "Oh, are you watching Connie?" He looked around hopefully.

The blue gem shook her head, pigtails swaying. "Sorry, lover boy, but your princess is still in her castle. It's just me." She motioned with her head. "Come on, let's go for a little walk."

Steven blinked then glanced at the bus he'd been headed toward. "Oh, but I was, um-"

Lapis waved him off. "Don't sweat it, Pinkie. I can fly you home after we're done. I just want to have a little chat."

Another moment passed and then Steven shrugged. "Okay." He turned and waved to his friends. "See you all tomorrow!"

They waved back, Jeff adding a chipper, “See you later,” but like good Beach City residents the duo maintained vigilance on their way to the bus.

Fifteen-year-old Steven and 'It's rude to ask but, no, older than that' Lapis walked down the sidewalk together. Steven filled the silence with his excited predictions on the upcoming Lutes and
Loot game Peedee had planned as well as ideas he had for his and Connie's one month-iversary coming up and-

Lapis stopped walking and looked at Steven, a big, genuine smile lighting up her face. Steven took this as his cue and stopped talking, offering a return smile up at the magical blue lady.

"You're a good guy, Pinkie Pie." The blue gem clapped her hand on Steven's shoulder. "And you and girlie together is too cute for words." Smiling like that cat from the Alice and Wonderland movie, she gestured at the rainbow overhead, visible for long enough that Steven sometimes forgot it was there.

Then the grip on his shoulder tightened and Lapis' smile was less cartoon cat and more cartoon shark. "You know what a 'shovel talk' is, Stevie?"

Nudged by Lapis, Steven began walking once more, though slowly. Her hand stayed on his shoulder as she strolled beside him, grip firm.

He shook his head and signed that he didn't. A beat later, because he tried to remember how hard the gems found sign language, he added in a quiet voice, "No."

"It's the talk where the family says something like, 'If you hurt her then they'll never find your body' to the new boyfriend. If the manga or show is subtle as a Quartz then someone will actually be holding a shovel too."

Steven swallowed in response.

"Thing is, this isn't that talk." Lapis' tone of voice lightened but her grip remained firm. "I think you're great for Con-con and if you were going to run away screaming, that would have happened months ago."

Still walking, Steven glanced in Miss Lapis' direction. "Then what talk is this?"

"You dating Connie is fine. But you fusing with Connie?" Lapis rounded on Steven, her eyes serious which Steven didn't see very often. "That's you two digging your own hole. Listen to someone who's been there: fusion is going to ruin a beautiful thing and no one wants that. Not me. Not you. Not Connie."

She held his gaze for a few more seconds, her eyes serious and her expression... worried? "You don't believe me, do you?" she asked, breaking eye contact and sighing.

Steven blinked. Right now his thoughts were like Lion after a little catnip: fast-moving and hard to catch. A little mental chasing later and he shook his head, jogging over to catch up with Miss Lapis. "I don't think you're wrong-wrong, just that maybe things are different for me and Connie."

Lapis' look was... level. "You remember Hiddenite, right? Tall gal, four arms, floats like a butterfly and stings like a b-word?"

The pause dragged on until Steven nodded in response.

"Well she was different too. Unlike Tiger's Eye or Azurite, Dot and I have never brought her out for a fight. For entertainment purposes only. And I kept telling the others, 'This is different. Peri and I are different. There's no messy history here to jank it up.' And I was right, there wasn't any messy history... until Peri and I made our own." Lapis shook her head. "Hiddenite's a blast and I'm sure Asmi is too, but when you look at me and Dot, or me and Jasper for that matter, do any of us look like we're happier for having those giant skeletons in our closets? If Peridot and I can make
something work, it'll be despite fusion, not because of it." She looked over at Steven again, mouth turned down. "Don't make the same mistake, Pinkie."

His Lion-thoughts went running like Dad was vacuuming. Steven chewed the inside of his cheek and, without realizing it, reached up and tugged a little on his earlobe. Finally he said, "What if I tell you what being Asmi is like? You would know if that was like being Hiddenite or Azurite or Mala-" and Steven cut himself off when he noticed Miss Lapis flinch. "If it's like the others, I mean," he finished, feeling a little glum just then.

Once she recovered, Miss Lapis gave Steven a side-eyed look. "Alright, Stevie, lay it on me."

"Asmi is all about fun. They're, like, if me and Connie having a really great day together was a person, someone tall and cool and who really didn't like to wear shoes." He shook his head. "I'm not really sure why there's that last part. Maybe because sand and grass feels so good between your toes?"

"I'm not going to give anyone flack for that," quipped the barefoot gem.

Steven chuckled in response. "I guess not. But, like, me and Connie were fusing as Asmi even before we were boyfriend and girlfriend, even before Asmi was named Asmi, but they've always been... fun. Sometimes whee-fun, sometimes quiet-book-reading-together-fun, sometimes I-can't-believe-we're-doing-this-fun, but always..." Steven trailed off.

“Fun?” finished Lapis in an amused voice.

“Yeah! And nothing has changed that, maybe because me and Connie were friends first. Best friends and Asmi is us being friends together. Just, you know, more together than normal, I guess."

Lapis’ eyes were narrowed like a detective looking at clues. "What's the longest you two have been Asmi before?"

Steven had to think about that. "One time it was a Saturday and Mom and Dad were in Empire all day and Connie was supposed to be training with Jasper but then that alert machine of hers went off so she left to go fight a monster person or something and I forget what you and Miss Peridot were doing but you weren't around so Connie called me and we packed this big picnic and we went to this part of the beach next to the cliffs and we didn't have to split until Mom called me for dinner so that was, like..." and Steven trailed off, mouthing as he counted on his fingers. "Ten hours? Eleven?"

That made one of Lapis’ eyebrows rise up. "And how did you split up?"

Steven blinked. "Um, I- I mean we saw the text from my mom so we just... split."

"Yeah, but who let go first?" pressed Miss Lapis. "And how were you and Connie feeling after?"

Steven looked past Lapis, trying to remember and trying figure out what she meant. "I don't think either of us let go first. We couldn't go home for dinner like that even though Mom had invited Connie to dinner too, because Mom hadn't caught-" Steven's eyes went wide and he made a choking sound.

"Because this was before early August?" finished Lapis, fluttering her eyes innocently at him. She seemed amused when Steven's coughing fit grew worse after that. When he started trying to say something --he wasn't really sure what, exactly, he was just trying to make words to say the things to make this not be... this-- Lapis waved him off. "Don't get your curls in a knot about it. Connie’s already grounded and OJ hasn’t tried to punch you into orbit so it’ll be fine for now.” She gave him
"Oh, okay. Steven needed a couple seconds before he'd coaxed the mind-Lion out of hiding and back onto his lap. "We both just kind of... let go, I guess. And after, we felt fine. A little sore because I'd seen this cool video about parkour on Tubetube and Asmi had summoned these big force fields and tried to use that and the cliffs to do these really cool kicks and flips and stuff and it was awesome but we slipped a few times and even though the sand is pretty soft it still hurt some."

More detective looks from Lapis. "Connie wasn't mad? You weren't either? At your mom if not at each other, since she ruined your good time?"

Steven shook his head simply.

"Yeah, okay, but you were both going to dinner together. Think of some time when you and Connie had to split up afterwards. You were having a great time, or she was, and then suddenly it was going to be over. Who's the one who didn't let you guys unfuse?" Lapis was tapping her chin with her index finger. "My money's on Con-con."

Another blank stare from Steven followed by, "You can stay fused if someone wants out?" There was a note of alarm creeping into his voice.

It was Lapis' turn to look confused. "You guys can't? You haven't?" A beat passed and then she asked, incredulously, "Ever?"

Steven gave a helpless shrug and a shake of his head. "Nooo..." he said slowly, unsure if she should feel proud or embarrassed.

Lapis made sweeping motions with her arms like she was brushing the whole subject aside. "Okay, I've got a good one. The first time you tykes fused: how'd it end?"

Steven thought back, one hand tightening around the straps of his backpack as he mentally relived that crazy-bananas day. "We didn't even realize we were fused at first but then we saw ourselves, um, Asmi, although they weren't named Asmi yet, in our reflection in the water. And Connie freaked out and we split."

Lapis nodded knowingly. "And then what happened?"

"Oh then things got super awkward because Connie thought we shouldn't fuse anymore and I was kind of worried too even though I'd thought it was super cool so we said we wouldn't do it again. Then we spent, like, all day trying not to think about it but we totally couldn't. And the next day was going to be the same but it was-" Steven's mouth shut so suddenly his teeth clacked.

Lapis wagged her finger at the teen. "Sorry, but you don't get to just tell me the good. I've tried ignoring that sort of thing myself but the bad always comes back; can't no one run away like I can and it even caught up to me so don't bother trying."

Steven's face screwed up but he couldn't see a way out so he gave Lapis his best apologetic look and said, "The next day was the Fourth of July and Hiddenite had that big argument with Jasper and it all kinda went kablooie and Miss Peridot flew away and you were sad and after it was all over Connie was walking me home and we talked about things and decided-

He swallowed and gave Lapis another apologetic look, the blue gem giving him a helpless 'go ahead' gesture as she wrapped her arms around her as if suddenly cold.

"And we decided that neither of us wanted to stop fusing, that it had been really great and didn't
actually sound like what you and Peridot, or you and Jasper, or Jasper and Miss Peridot were talking about in that big argument. We thought maybe fusion wasn't good for gems but maybe, if we were careful, it could be good for us.

They walked in silence for a while, Lapis looking like a balloon that had started to lose air. A while later she raised an eyebrow wearily and asked, "Lemme guess, you also decided you had to keep it a secret from me and the others, right?"

Steven nodded, saying a silent 'sorry' with his eyes.

The silence stretched on for a little longer before Miss Lapis finally said, "Well, it does prove one point of mine."

"Huh?"

"Run, fly, or warp, sooner or later the bad always catches up with me," and she gave a laugh that wasn't at all funny.

"We're trying to be careful," said Steven in a soft voice. "And, I mean, we know it can work because it works for Miss Garnet. Me and Connie have been figuring it out and we think we can help you and Miss Peridot and Jasper figure it out too. Bismuth too if she does fusion."

Lapis, distracted, shook her head, eyes on the distance. "She never has that I've heard about. Said she liked getting her own hands dirty, not someone else's," and she gave a 'what can you do' shrug.

Then she looked at Steven as if seeing him for the first time. She rolled her eyes and said, "Well, shoot. Now I feel a little bad for narcing you out to your parents."

"Wait, what?!"

Lapis gave a weak smile. "Yep. Dropped by earlier to let 'em know that Con-con was grounded and why. 'Course Momma-verse already knew so I don't think it'll be that big a deal. Still, in about two hours you might want to give Connie a call so she can vent."

"About what?" Steven blinked, adding, "Two hours?"

"Because you're not the only one getting a talking to and Dot likes to take her time." Then Lapis opened her arms like she was offering Steven a hug. No, more like she was offering him a boost. "Come on, I'll fly you home."

With only a little hesitation --Lapis had flown him across town before and it had made him want to do something less exciting afterward... like ride a roller coaster or try and give Lion a bath AND THEN clip his nails-- he let her pick him up. "So you think me and Connie will be okay fusing?"

he asked hopefully.

Lapis shook her head, one of her pigtails bapping him in the face like Lion pawing him in the mornings when his food bowl was empty. "I'm not saying that. But if it's a bad idea, at least you two have found an exciting new way to jank it all up which has to count for something." She had a smirk but her eyes looked kind of sad.

Then her eyes looked happy again but in a ‘Lion about to pounce’ way and she gave him a wink and said, "Hang on tight, Pinkie."

Then they were flying and Steven wasn't able to answer because he was too busy screaming.
Connie was laying on her side reading from the book Pearl had gifted her, hearing aids out both because it was more comfortable and because she was pretty much deaf to the world while engrossed in a story anyway. Reading through it again after everything that had come to light, about Pearl, about her, about the Rebellion, it forced Connie to recontextualize some things.

Still, it was a really good story.

So engrossed was she that when a floating finger wafted into view and gestured at her, she could practically hear the gears in her brain grinding as it struggled to shift perspectives.

Several bewildered seconds later Connie closed her book --carefully; this book was literally irreplaceable-- and sat up, putting her hearing aids in. Looking over she saw Peridot standing near the kitchen divider looking up at her.

"I apologize for interrupting your textual activity, dear," she said, "but would you please accompany me to my workshop?"

Connie raised an eyebrow in response.

Peridot mimed removing Connie's power sink. "I have some repair work that would be more efficacious with your assistance and..." She faltered for just a second before saying, "And there is a matter I'd like to discuss with you."

There were about a dozen subjects Connie could think of that Peridot might want to talk about, most of them some degree of unpleasant, but on some level Connie had been steeling herself for this. It was part of the reason she hadn't minded hanging out and being lazy today.

"Okay, ma'am," and Connie gingerly shelved her book, slipped on her shoes (you didn't go barefoot in Peridot's workshop unless you were Lapis), and followed after her green caregiver. A few yards into the workshop and she remembered something, going back to the entrance and hanging her power sink from one of the hooks on the wall for just that purpose.

The lava flows smelled like cinnamon today.

Several minutes passed in quiet preparation: from Connie in mentally reviewing her critiques of the status quo; from Peridot in assembling the tools needed to do... something to a block of backpack-sized gemtech that was curiously pink in coloration.

Peridot noticed her staring at the device. "Ah, this is a component from the orbital platform Lapis and I will be laboring on later tonight, the sixth I'm hopeful to bring to full operational readiness."

A thought struck Connie, something she'd never considered before. "Do you think I could see one of them? In space, I mean?"

This took Peridot by surprise. She opened her mouth and said nothing for several seconds, her eyes alternately staring at Connie and then into the distance, no doubt making a mental catalog of the many things required to make such a trip safe for someone who couldn't survive unassisted in the vacuum of space.

"With sufficient preparation," she said eventually, "I believe that would be possible. To be honest, I suspect the most complicated element would be devising a means for Lapis to convey you to and from high-Earth orbit with adequate safety margins and failsafes." She shrugged. "A project for another day, however."

Connie knew what was coming next.
Peridot did a few preliminary tasks, opening panels and plugging cables into various outlets on the block of pink gemtech. Then she positioned herself so that she was facing Connie; they would talk while she stood there, her limb enhancers running whatever pre-programmed routine she'd prepared for this work. She'd been able to do that and walk around before, but with two of her fingers operating on tethers instead of hover-tech...

"I think your fusing with the Steven is not in your, or his, best interests," she said finally, her voice level.

Connie managed, barely, to not roll her eyes. She also had to resist the impulse to check what Peridot's mindscape looked like just then; it'd be a comfort to know more about the territory she was walking into. However, her inner Steven quickly vetoed that idea and her inner critic told her to focus.

"What are your suppositions to support that argument, ma'am?" asked Connie, the exchange a familiar one from years of classroom debate. With a twinge of annoyance she felt the faint stirring of static in her hair, her eyes glancing furtively at where her power sink hung on the far wall.

Peridot nodded primly at Connie's response. "They are three-fold. Firstly, fusion is a known source of strife and instability between gems and although neither you or Steven are gems in the conventional sense, the same principles should still apply. Secondly, the effects of fusion on organic beings is wholly unstudied so there could be attendant health risks. And thirdly, there are matters of propriety to consider as members of the Crystal Gems." She didn't count off her points as she spoke but only because her fingers were already busily at work and couldn't be spared.

Connie steepled her fingers and brought them up to her face as she tried to organize her thoughts. A deep breath later she nodded to herself and pointed her index fingers at Peridot. "Okay. To address your first point I say that Steven and I have been fusing with full awareness of the potential for strife. We have been vigilant for signs of it and have in fact made every effort to stop any before it happened by being open and communicative throughout. To put it bluntly, we had the rest of the Crystal Gems as an example not to follow."

That had been blunt and Peridot did wince slightly but this was a debate, not an argument. You lost points if you lost your cool, especially when the other person was staying on point.

"Even so," said Peridot, "the body of empirical evidence extends back centuries. Millennia, in fact. And that evidence is overwhelmingly in support of fusion being corrosive to interpersonal relationships." Various lights on the pink whatsit lit up and a hologram appeared for Peridot to glance at and then dismiss.

"Objection: you're making an appeal to probability." Connie had learned all about the various fallacies you could make in a debate, some from study and some from having Peridot invoke them against her. "Not every change is an improvement but every improvement is a change and your argument would imply fusion can only ever be source of strife."

Connie wasn't certain but she imagined that if she glanced at Peridot's mindscape just then she'd see a splash of maroon uncertainty, the same color as the obvious counter-example: Garnet.

Peridot made a pinched face but after more than a minute of contemplation said, "Point conceded but only on recognition that you and the Steven have been engaging in semi-regular fusion for months."

Her tutor was obviously marshaling rhetorical ammunition for something else but that wasn't a point Connie could or would dispute. "Accepted though I want it noted that Steven and I spent
those months working purposefully and with our goal in mind." She ignored the faint crackle of static.

Mouth a line Peridot said only, "Noted," and didn't argue further.

Peridot had a water fountain in her workshop. The sides of it were coated in layers of old tape, the occasional corner of yellowed paper trapped underneath, because a much younger Connie had liked sticking her crayon drawings on it. Despite keeping the fountain clean and hygienic, Peridot had seemed reluctant to remove the tape itself and Connie had never pressed her on it. Tucked beside it there was even the old stool she'd used as a child so she could reach the spigot. Connie took a moment to get a drink and collect her thoughts. Also to unload as much electricity into the metal as she could, the frizz in her hair subsiding fractionally as she did.

She walked back and said, "To address your second point I have to ask: have your scans detected any health issues in either Steven or me that weren't present prior to early July?"

Peridot's eyes went wide. "How early in July?" she asked a touch reluctantly.

"July third and-" Debate or otherwise Connie hesitated a moment before saying, "-and July fourth." The frizz was returning.

Peridot’s fingers continued their work but the gem herself seemed to at loss. After a while she asserted, "Nothing overt has registered in the scans but whereas in the previous argument you rejected a large corpus of data, here there is too little to say definitively."

"So you're saying if Steven and I had fused over a longer span of time we'd know better if it was safe for Steven and me to fuse." Connie didn't have to hide the incredulity creeping into her voice.

Peridot started to nod then caught herself, mouth open. It shut with an audible clack.

"There's too little data and is therefore dangerous," summarized Connie, "and therefore is not something we should do and therefore is not something we can ever gain more data about." Her hands went to her hips. "That is not how you investigate a novel phenomenon, ma'am." The static cling on her clothes intensified slightly.

"You say that now but that doesn't make it retroactively a wise decision! What if something had gone obviously wrong while you two were experimenting in secrecy?"

Peridot's voice had risen and that should have been a mark against her but Connie couldn't deny her point. It actually was kind of amazing that magic could integrate her and Steven, what with them being made out of people stuff instead of light. And it could have gone wrong: her shapeshifting power was proof that not everything her gemstone let her do was entirely safe. Actually...

With a contrite expression, Connie said, "You're right, ma'am, it could have gone wrong and that was irresponsible of Steven and me. However, that's not the point we're arguing right now. There is data and it suggests it is safe, at least in the short-term. And the only way to discover any longer term issues is through continued study. Take my shapeshift ability, for example-"

Peridot pounced on this, raising her primary limb enhancer overhead for emphasis since she could do so without troubling her floating fingers. "You get stuck in your new form and require assistance reverting. Failure to do so and you chance an agonizing involuntary reversion thereafter."

"Exactly," retorted Connie. "And despite that it's something I'm allowed to do. It's precedent of an acceptable margin of risk in these sorts of things. I could turn into a cat right now and it wouldn't
be grounds for, well, a grounding." Hastily, before Peridot could rebut, she added, "But I promise you that Steven and I will be mindful of the risks going forward and will let you scan us and Asmi to be sure."

Peridot's eyes narrowed. "Point conceded," she said, fixing Connie with an intense 'you had better' glare as she did.

Connie in no way made a jump of victorious celebration but she thought one really, really hard.

After a few seconds of mental end zone dancing, Connie cleared her throat and said, "To your final point, I have two counterarguments. The first is that, well, you and the others are wrong about fusion and therefore the stigma associated with it isn't justified."

This time it was Peridot giving her a look. "That is hardly a sound argument. If nothing else it presupposes it's own justification: that the Crystal Gems are in the wrong on matters of fusion and the propriety thereof."

"The Rebellion was divided at one time and one faction had no taboo against fusion," started Connie.

"A faction which was wrong, defeated, and not representative of the Crystal Gem organization still active on Earth."

"Garnet," was Connie's one-word rebuttal, punctuated by a small crackle of sparks.

Peridot was about to raise both limb enhancers skyward when she remembered the tethered fingers and arrested the motion. "We are not arguing if fusion around Garnet is justified and I'm certain you are aware of that fact."

Connie ran a hand through her frizzy hair. "Okay, fine, but my point is that it's not an inherent quality of the Rebellion but rather a matter of historical coincidence."

"I'd hardly call your mother's triumph for the good of Earth coincidence, nor do I find your argument compelling."

"But you would find it compelling if Citrine herself had no such complaint about fusion," the words flying out of Connie's mouth.

Her guardian looked at her perplexed, head cocked to the side. "Yes, I would accept Citrine as a justified authority in such matters but that's an academic point at best: she is hardly able to weigh in on the matter now." Her expression had softened by the end and her voice grown quiet.

It was clear that Peridot didn't enjoy saying that any more than Connie enjoyed hearing it but Connie had forced the matter on purpose. "True but Mom did write that journal for me, the one she kept hidden in her archives. And, shoot, I'd have to run and get it to read you the exact sentence, but Mom said that fusion didn't need to be just for combat, just that I needed to be careful doing it."

“So you claim the taboo is neither inherent nor justified as Citrine herself had no such reservation.”

Connie nodded, adding, “And it’s not like it’s part of the official oath either. Just something that,” she shrugged, “happened along the way.”

The green gem stared at Connie for a long time, long enough that Connie started to fidget nervously. Eventually she said, "I'll ask you to cite your source later-" and Connie nodded vigorously, "-but assuming your statement is accurate..."
She lapsed into another silence, staring off into the distance. Finally she looked at Connie and her expression had changed. Gone was the reserved mask of the debate opponent. Instead was the vulnerable look of a worried caregiver. "I don't actually find fusion... repugnant. You know that, right?"

Connie nodded, unsure what, if anything, to say.

"But it *has* caused problems. For me, for Jasper, and most especially for Lapis. It's an alarming thought that you could be embarking on a similar path. But it has long been my hope that, perhaps..." She trailed off, her expression growing distant. Then she shook her head, blinking her eyes behind her glasses. "But I have hoped before and been bitterly disappointed time and again."

"I know," said Connie softly. "I remember how it was after New Years. And after the Fourth of July, even if that wasn't as bad. But the Rebellion happened by gems not taking the status quo for granted; they were willing to question it and even fight Homeworld to strive for something that might have been better. This isn't nearly as big but it's the same principle at work."

Her guardian gave her another look, this one peculiar, maybe like she was seeing Connie for the first time. Then she smiled, if a tad ruefully. "Your father and I agreed earlier today that you were quite the passionate, burgeoning intellect. I did not realize at the time just how prescient that observation would be."

Connie smiled. Then Connie blinked. Then Connie frowned. "You were talking with Dad?" Her hair began to gain volume and charge.

Peridot's wistful expression evaporated, replaced by something abashed. "Ah, yes. It might be prudent for you to contact your father for a similar conversation after this. I informed him of the, erm, particulars of your punitive status."

"Wait, what?!"

Peridot would have wrung her hand-equivalents if they weren't mid-task. "It seemed judicious at the time, in the spirit of your call for greater communication and transparency, in fact." Another thought seemed to strike Peridot and she grimaced.

"Maaa'am?" asked Connie, a rising note of concern in her voice.

"Erm, after speaking with your father you should also consider communicating with the Steven."

She really did look apologetic but that didn't actually make Connie feel better. Quite the opposite.

"About what?" Connie somehow managed in an almost normal tone.

"Because Lapis should be having a similar discussion with Steven concurrently with our own."

Connie fixed Peridot with a long stare. Peridot replied with a weak smile and said, "If you'll linger slightly longer I'll interrupt the pre-programmed portion of my work and switch over to a conventional power source so you can step into unfolded space and make your phone calls." She cleared her throat. "And my apologies, dear."

The teen stood a second longer and then nodded, slumping down into a seated position on the floor. She released a desultory shower of sparks at the same time she gave an exasperated sigh.

A couple of minutes passed and then Connie, head still resting on her palms, looked up at the green gem. "So... do you think it's okay for Steven and me to fuse?" she asked hopefully.
Peridot hemmed and hawed a little, her face shifting through several expression in succession. Finally she said, "I will say that you made several very compelling arguments today. I still have my reservations but I can't fault you, or Steven, for seeking to better the Crystal Gems as a whole." Her various fingers then withdrew from the pink block and several lights blinked out. "Very good, you should now be free to make your departure."

Connie rose to her feet and nodded. "Thanks, ma'am. For listening to me."

Peridot smiled back, a wide and genuine grin on her face. "Civil discourse is always a pleasure, if sometimes a rare one. And, while this may not be the most auspicious of occasions, it is good to be with you once more, dear." The smile held a second longer and then she bent down over her work. 

*Not a resounding victory but I'll take it,* Connie thought. Then she grimaced as she remembered what she was going to be doing next, every attempt to imagine her dad’s reaction causing her imagination to blow a fuse. Her hair frizzed out further as she walked back toward her power sink.

Chapter End Notes

The promo was drawn by BurdenKing.

We'll see you Wednesday, April 3rd for the next exciting installment of *Notes from the Undergrounded!*

I have a treat from NeonJohn: remember when the gems had to disguise themselves as Pearl birds back in Ep31? Well, here's a delightful depiction of that! Thanks NeonJohn!

There's an episode bingo card, created by the ever-excellent BinaryGeek from speculation within the Connie Swap Discord with only the episode's title and summary for guidance. Great work, y'all!
Lot's of great content to mention as well.

*) **Gemiverse** by **Moondragon8** - "Steven Universe, son of Rose Quartz, and Connie Maheswaran, daughter of Citrine, are best friends. Despite the fact that their guardians dislike each other, their mothers are shrouded in mystery, and they know far too little about the legacies they're bearing, they have each other, and it's fine. Because nothing can tear them apart. Right? (inspired by Connie Swap.)"

*) **Same Old Steven** by **citrusella** - "Steven, trying to come to terms with what happened between him and Connie following Episode 16, decides to talk to his close friend Neimaat. He quickly gets more than he bargained for, but maybe that's just what he needs." This fic is 100% canon.

And lastly, something that is NOT Connie Swap related but IS Connie Swap TEAM related. After Connie Swap I plan to write an original story not associated with any existing fandom. I've written a series of six vignettes, each showcasing a character from the story in a short 'day in the life' format. The vignettes are also supposed to introduce some of the world and people of the setting as they go. I plugged this back when it first went up but a sixth (and probably final) vignette has been added in the window between Ep32 and Ep33. If you're fond of what I bring to Connie Swap and don't mind off-roading it out of the fandom, you might enjoy giving this a look.

*) **Amalgam** by **br42** - "Meet Bonnie, Realgar, Vex, Heyan'Dasa, Batugei, and Atsushi in a collection of short stories introducing the characters, races, and setting of Amalgam."

If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

Connie Swap has an official Discord for the fans. [Come check it out](#).
As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the Connie Swap Tumblr. Thanks for reading!
Dividing Edge, Part 1: Grappling with the Truth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

--- September 18th---

"Hi Robinson," said a cheery voice that sent a thrill through Connie. There was an electronic chirp in response, all taking place on the Beach House porch.

Connie looked up from her homework --tutoring had resumed that morning-- and saw Steven through the screen door, dressed in workout clothes, cheeseburger backpack in tow. She was up and pulling him into a hug before he'd even stepped all the way inside.

"Steven! I missed you!"

The fact that she'd missed him didn't surprise her, but the intensity of it had. She'd talked with him on the phone yesterday following her debate with Peridot, and pretty much all of their waking hours had involved discreet texting; right now the gems seemed not to want to notice her phone use or TV watching so she did what she could to maintain the illusion. But despite all that, it wasn't until just now, with Steven hugging her back, that she felt right.

She'd had no idea before just how potent this romance stuff really was.

The hug tightened for a second and Steven said, "I really missed you too." Then he pecked her on the cheek and she felt like she was very gently on fire.

Lapis and Peridot were in space again and Bismuth was still gone, presumably at the forge. Jasper, finally back from patrol, was getting the training equipment set up at the sky arena. Which meant that, for a few minutes at least, it was just the two of them.

Despite having the entire couch to themselves they still found themselves practically sharing the same cushion, Steven's hand in hers as she nuzzled up beside him and rested her head on his shoulder. A little while passed with just her breathing in the scent of his floral shampoo and reveling in his proximity.

Seriously, this romance stuff needed a warning label or something.

Steven and she sat in silence, simply being together. Finally, Steven asked, "Did Miss Lapis say anything about fusion stuff?"

Connie felt the vibrations of his voice through contact as much as she heard him. She shook her head against his shoulder. "Peridot didn't say much either; the lecture this morning was about orbital mechanics. I think she was inspired by all the trips Lapis and she have been taking into space lately."

A moment passed and then she thought she could hear the smile widen on Steven's face before he said, "Still." A deep breath. "Go Team Asmi!" he cheered. Connie's own smile broadened to match and she added her own 'Woo!' pivoting so she could wrap her arms around Steven's midsection and give him a congratulatory squeeze.

They'd compared notes over yesterday's call and texts and the general consensus was: \(\(\cdot\cdot\cdot\cdot\cdot\cdot\cdot\cdot\)\).
"I think we really convinced them yesterday!" observed Connie, still snuggled close. "With a little more time and another win like that we really might-"

There was a flash and a chime from the warp pad. Jasper nodded in the pair's direction. "Ready?"

It had been a while but they were finally resuming regular training.

The teens pulled apart and stood up, Steven nodding in return as he shouldered the backpack containing his shield, *the* shield. Then he glanced at Connie and said with a half-grin, "Maybe today will be a win too."

Connie wiggled her nose to signal that the message had been received.

If Jasper thought anything of this exchange she kept it to herself, moving slightly to make room on the pad for the group. Then, in a flash of light, they were gone.

At first Connie and Steven had tried to be subtle, to edge a fusion talk into the course of the training session. Jasper had risen to none of the bait.

Then, by wordless agreement, they'd skipped subtle and raised the subject directly. Jasper had twice now told them to focus on their training. The third time she'd stared silently at them until Connie and Steven resumed their exercises just to break the mounting awkwardness.

A furtive huddle during a water break had failed to turn up any brilliant new strategies.

Just as the pair stepped clear of the bleachers to resume training Jasper said, "Connie, free weights," and tilted her head in the direction of the rack of dumbbells. These Mr. Universe had donated to the cause... along with quite a bit of other workout gear, nearly all of which had still been in the original packaging when they'd unearthed it from his barn all those months ago.

"Steven, come here." Jasper was standing on the edge of some blue workout mats that'd been spread across a section of the sky arena. Steven started to reach for where he'd set down the shield when she said, "Don't bother. We're practicing grappling."

Steven shrugged and jogged over while Connie watched and did some bicep curls. Before she'd ever met Steven, she and a shapeshifted Jasper had practiced grabs and throws. But as the two squared off on the mat and Jasper was still towering over her boyfriend, she said, "Uh, Jasper? Aren't you going to shrink down first?"

Jasper shook her head. "Steven needs to train in case he's grabbed by an opponent who's larger and stronger."

On auto-pilot Connie switched out the weights and began doing wrist curls, her expression skeptical. Maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed like Jasper had been particularly... demanding of Steven this training session. "You never made me grapple you full-sized," she pressed.

Jasper's expression remained carved in stone. "You now have at least three powers that could let you avoid or escape a grapple. Steven doesn't."

Alright, that was a better point than she'd expected but it still rankled.

Then she noticed Steven trying to catch her eye. He signed at her and she, setting her weights down, signed back with a big grin.
"Actually," said Steven with a rising, chipper tone in his voice, "there is one magical thing I can do that would help." Connie had already jogged over to where her phone was in the bleachers and queued up their song.

Jasper looked surprised for half a second before understanding dawned. She didn’t object but she did cross her arms over her chest while looking very unamused.

The two danced briefly, the pair able to achieve fusion before the song even reached the one-minute mark. As yellow light engulfed them, Steven was making a delighted laugh that Asmi continued, ending with a little giggle-snort like Connie sometimes did. They opened their eyes and grinned widely at the awesome floating architecture around them, familiar but suddenly new and exciting too.

They then noticed Jasper across the mat from them. She looked unimpressed, but more importantly she didn't look nearly as tall as before, her gem at about eye-height for the fusion.

Asmi flashed Jasper a cocky grin and dropped into an offensive stance. "Not so small or weak now, eh?"

Jasper remained silent while stepping onto the mat. Her demeanor radiated 'let's get this over with.' Though after a moment and a glance at Asmi's gemstone she offered a shallow bow to her opponent.

Asmi bowed back, their grin resurfacing immediately after. Inside Asmi was a bubbling exuberance, excitement and optimism in equal measure, but if the complex dance of emotions within them was put to words it might be something like, *It would be so cool if I'm stronger than Jasper!* This was accompanied by the mental image of a surprised Jasper held overhead and giving an impressed thumbs up to the fusion.

The two opponents circled one another.

"What, no lecture about how Connie and Steven shouldn't be fusing?" teased Asmi.

Jasper gave the faintest of head shakes.
"That's what Lapis and Peridot did."

Jasper tried to reach out and get a hold on Asmi's forearm but the fusion evaded, dancing back a step. "Not surprised," said the Quartz.

Then Asmi abruptly lunged forward, going for a grab. Jasper reacted in time, bringing her arms up so that orange hands met brown and the pair struggled for dominance.

**Woo! I'm stronger! I'm stronger! I'm- No, not stronger! Definitely not stronger!**

For a moment the two had seemed well-matched, Asmi even pushing Jasper back slightly. Jasper’s expression remained locked into muted disapproval but the faint rise of an eyebrow was tell enough to show she hadn't expected that. Then the Perfect Quartz brought more strength to bear and the contest shifted swiftly in the opposite direction.

Thoughts and emotions whirled within the fusion before an idea coalesced that left them grinning inward and outward. Heaving backward, Asmi yanked Jasper off balance and dropped to the mat, turning their momentum into a textbook throw, one that they had never done before/knew by heart. As the Perfect Quartz flashed overhead, almost too fast to be seen, Asmi caught an glimpse of Jasper wide-eyed in surprise.

Asmi tried really hard to burn that image forever into their thoughts. You could even say she looked completely thrown, and the fusion giggled at their own joke.

There was a heavy 'whump' behind while Asmi rolled backwards and sprung to their feet. Then they stepped forward and offered Jasper a hand up. "See? Steven doesn't know that throw, or he didn't until now. But I'm all the cool stuff about Connie and Steven in the same package."

Jasper certainly didn't need the help up and for a second it looked like she would refuse. Then her face went stoic once more and she accepted the hand up as a show of good sportsmanship.

"Fusions are stronger than their components but strength is just one part of a fight." Jasper walked back to her spot on the mat. "One strong opponent can be easier to beat than two weaker opponents working in unison."

"Steven and Connie can't work any more in unison than this," countered Asmi, ready to begin another round.

The second Asmi assumed a ready stance Jasper shot forward, the Quartz looming large in the blink of an eye. The fusion tried to twist out of the way but strong hands had them, then they were off their feet, and then they were on their back and pinned.

Looking up, all they could see was a Jasper eclipse. *Today's forecast calls for mostly Quartzy with a chance of pain.*

Jasper helped them to their feet. "Malachite couldn't approach the Ziggurat during the war. Too large a target, too many cannons. Whatever gems gain from fusion, they lose in tactical flexibility. Connie and Steven could flank me. One could distract or make a feint, providing an opening for the other." Her gaze locked on Asmi's. "If needed, Steven could sacrifice himself to allow Connie to escape. Fused, none of that is possible."

Asmi had to suppress a shiver at the thought. That Carella and Roland were still picking up pieces of Samwise in *Lutes and Loot* was proof of Jasper's opinion on the subject of heroic sacrifices. Pushing past that, they said, "When the two of them need to be two, they still can be. And when they don't, they can be me."
Having been caught off guard once each, Asmi and Jasper circled one another cautiously this time.

"Citrine never fused with her shieldbearer." Jasper's expression didn't change but her tone hardened. She broke a grab attempt and made one of her own. It failed and both continued to circle.

"Citrine-" Asmi almost called her 'Mom' just then. "-was worried about what others would see if she fused with them. Maybe that's why she only fused with you and Lapis together instead of individually."

"How do you-" started Jasper, her gaze flicking between Asmi's face and their gemstone.

"Her journal to Connie." Asmi's expression was sympathetic for a half-second... and then they were gritting their teeth, closing fast and hoping Jasper was distracted.

At first it looked like the tactic had worked; Asmi managed to step to one side, pulling Jasper into an armlock. However, actually getting leverage enough to force Jasper to the mat was proving really difficult. Then Jasper, who had both strength and size on her side, managed to slowly reverse the situation. Finally, Asmi, unwilling to release the captured orange arm, was pulled around enough for Jasper to get ahold of their shoulder with her free hand. A difficult but inexorable trip to the mat followed for the fusion.

Jasper offered Asmi a hand. Asmi stared at it, beaded with sweat and panting for breath. "You lost," said the Quartz. "Connie, unfuse. We'll start again after a break."

Asmi's eyes narrowed though they did accept the help up. "You know, being bigger and stronger than me doesn't actually prove me wrong. It doesn't even prove you right. It just proves that grappling really favors whoever is bigger and stronger."

The warrior was impassive. "Your point?" she asked eventually.

In the distance a force field appeared, a ring of yellow magic circling the shield that was resting near the bleachers. "My point is that maybe we should have a fight that actually proves something."

Jasper summoned her helmet in response.

Asmi wiped their brow and jogged over toward their shield. "I don't understand you, Jasper." They grabbed a quick swig of water then began to buckle the shield to their left arm. "Lapis was worried that fusion would ruin Steven's relationship with Connie. And Peridot thought it might be unhealthy or unseemly for Connie to fuse with Steven."

They jogged back over to the mat, a breeze feeling good even as it brought goosebumps across their milk chocolate skin. "But I don't understand why you are so upset about me?"

"Connie is impressive, a worthy successor to Citrine's legacy. Steven is proving himself a worthy shieldbearer and worthy-" Jasper paused, the wind making her mane sway while she sought the word. "-boyfriend."

Asmi waited. When it became clear Jasper didn't intend to say more, they said, "And you don't think I make the cut?"

More silence.

Asmi dropped into an offensive stance, a smirk rising to their face. "Then let's see if this helps with the cutting."
In their mind's eye Pearl and Amethyst were huddled fearfully together. Jasper was advancing, per Peridot's orders. Lapis' water hand towered overhead. Why won't anyone listen to me?! Why is everyone else. So. Wrong?!

The gemstone in Asmi's chest flared with light but no hand reached for it, their expression a mix of shock and concern. "Is it always like- But they didn't-"

Determination swept over Asmi's features, their eyes narrowing as they focused on Jasper. They shook their head. "Let's try that again."

Why is everyone else. So. Wrong?!

The gemstone glowed and something radiant began to emerge from its surface. Asmi reached in, grasped the hilt of the sword-

-and fissioned with an audible 'pop.' Steven and Connie landing unceremoniously on the arena floor. The former looked bewildered and worried, the yellow-encircled shield strapped to his left arm. The latter held a dazed but faintly angry expression, clutching her sword in a white-knuckle grip while angry crackles of electricity sizzled along the length of the blade.

Jasper unsummoned her helmet and swept past them. "I'm not impressed," she said in a bored voice and began to pack up the training equipment.

"I know it wasn't good that Miss Lapis and Miss Peridot and Jasper tried to break Pearl and Amethyst's rocketship," assured Steven.

The two were back on the Beach House couch but they certainly weren't sharing the same cushion this time. Connie sat on the end nearest the front door, over where Lapis and she habitually parked themselves. Steven, meanwhile, was sitting on the cushion adjacent to the groove worn into the opposite end, this the result of Jasper usually claiming the spot nearest the temple door and warp pad. The shield was back in Steven's pack, the attached force field dismissed, and the sword had been allowed to dissolve into motes of light before they'd warped back.

"But they were doing what they thought was best to protect the Earth," continued Steven. "I can't be mad at them for that. They weren't being mean or bad. Just... wrong." His voice trailed off from there. Then, with an optimistic lilt, he added, "But they'll learn the right way eventually, I just know it."

Connie wasn't looking directly at Steven, wasn't looking directly at anything, just glowering in the direction of the window seat. "But I knew what was right. I told them. I pleaded with them not to do it but they refused to listen." Connie's expression grew acerbic. "They're not dumb. Of course they'll learn if you and me shout it at them loud enough for long enough, but we shouldn't have to!"

Steven, without realizing it, started to finger comb his hair, nervous energy needing somewhere to go. He frowned pensively. "Is it always like that?" he asked in a soft voice. "When you summon your sword?"

Connie's shoulders drooped a little and a sigh escaped her lips. Absently she reached up and fiddled with her left hearing aid. "Yes."

There was a beat of silence and Connie’s expression hardened. Shoulders pulled back and chin raised defiantly, she said, "Actually, no." There was a glow, a motion, and then the blade was once more in her hands. She pivoted so that Steven was in her field of view. "Normally I don't have to justify myself to you when I summon it."
Steven was taken aback.

Connie's expression shifted from frustrated to pleading, faintly lit by the yellow glow of her sword. "We were right in front of Jasper. We could have convinced her, or half-convinced her. Then maybe she and Lapis and Peridot would listen to us, again, and I wouldn't be grounded, and everyone could be less wrong about fusion. But that didn't happen and now Jasper thinks Asmi's a joke or something." She searched Steven's face, asking only, "Why?"

Steven fidgeted, his eyes finding it hard to stay on Connie's face for very long. "I'm sorry but-" the words tumbling out like one long word, 'I'm sorry but.' He chewed the inside of his cheek and thought how to finish the sentence. "I'm sorry. Asmi is important and fusion is important but your sword is important too and it shouldn't be- you shouldn't be... angry."

"You never objected before," pressed Connie.

Steven's frown deepened. "I never knew before. I mean, yeah, you usually got kind of cranky after you summoned it but I just thought, maybe, it was 'cause it felt weird coming out of your gemstone, like that feeling when you squeak the chalk at the chalkboard and it sounds bad but it also makes your skin crawl because how it feels with the chalk, like, scraping against the board." By the end his face had scrunched up and his lips puckered as even the memory of squeaked chalk was enough to give him the willies.

Connie stared at him, she stared at him for a long time, first in surprise and then in a kind of sad wonderment. "Steven, I have literally shared a head with you. How did I never know you thought that?"

Steven glanced over at the warp pad but, no, Jasper was still doing clean up at the sky arena. It was just him and Connie. And her sword.

"I didn't think it was important. Also," and he quirked his mouth up into a weak, apologetic smile as if trying to soften bad news, "you're usually a little scary right after you summon your sword. Cool-scary, awesome-scary, but, ya know... scary."

Connie recoiled. She looked sad. Then she looked worried. Then she was looking at Steven, eyes narrowing. "Well excuse me, I'm sorry my magical powers aren't friendly enough for you. Next time I'll be sure to ask for a fluffy pink destiny with bubbles and ice cream."

"That's not what I-" started Steven but Connie trampled over his words with her own.

"Do you know how long it took for me to summon my sword on purpose? How long it was between when I summoned it accidentally and when I summoned it for real at the launch protecting Pearl and Amethyst?"

"Eleven months exactly. For eleven months all I wanted to do was figure it out. I'd go to sleep thinking about it and I'd wake up from dreaming about it and I tried everything I could. And now I know how and maybe it does make me kind of cranky but only because I'm reminded how much people around here don't take me seriously. This is too important, Steven," and she waggled the sword to make it clear what 'this' was. "I can't just stop summoning my sword."

"Asmi is important too," he said gently. "And Asmi can't summon your sword."
Her sword sparked and shone brightly as she stood up from the couch. "And whose fault is that?" she asked bitterly.

Steven face showed alarm at first but then his expression saddened and he was looking sorribly at her. Not that he was sorry for what he'd done, but that he felt sorry for Connie.

That was entirely too much for her just then. Connie had felt like she was riding a galloping Wolf and only barely hanging on and seeing Steven feeling bad for her meant she'd done something very wrong and right now she just couldn't handle that. She wasn't the bad guy here. She wasn't the one that had embarrassed them in front of Jasper, who set back their attempt plan to redeem fusion within the Crystal Gems, who might have locked the door on her getting ungrounded before she was old enough to vote.

"Please go," she said in a low and angry voice. Her jaw began to ache from how her teeth were clenched together.

"Connie, I-" Steven rose to his feet too and took a half-step in her direction.

"Please. Go," she ground out.

Then she pointed toward the door with her sword. A spark leapt from the tip and arced through the living room to sizzle away to nothing on the door handle.

"Fine," barked Steven, sounding surprised by his own words.

"Fine," Connie replied back.

Both of them recoiled a step from the other.

"Fine!" Steven repeated, looking as angry as someone could while pulling the straps of a cheeseburger-themed backpack over his shoulders.

"FINE!" Connie all but shouted.

There was a sound of sandaled feet stomping away and the bang of a screen door swung shut. Robinson, the robonoid out on the porch, gave an electronic chirp goodbye and then the Beach House was empty save for the receding sound of someone descending the steps and the angry crackle of Connie's sword.

A moment later the silence was complete, Steven gone, the sword dropped and dissolved. Connie hurried up the stairs of her loft to go scream into her pillow and maybe do some crying inside Blanketville.

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious what Asmi's workout outfit looked like, MJ was kind enough to work up the following model. Note: Connie, Steven, and Asmi are NOT to scale.
Connie had been sad before. She'd had a few lows that had been pretty dang low in her life, times when she felt like she'd been flung into a bottomless pit labeled 'Sadness.'

Anger, frustration, self-pity; she'd had her share of them all in her nearly fourteen years. But she'd never felt any of them while dating someone. Specifically, she'd never felt them toward the person she was dating.

Somehow the bottomless pit had spikes at the end. No, that didn't make sense, but you knew the spikes were down there, you could see them even though they never seemed to get closer. Worse still, the spikes were arranged by some impossibly evil person so that seen from above they looked Steven's face. Sometimes the face was crying, sometimes it was angry, other times it was looking at you sorrily and that was worst of all.

She'd had no idea before just how terrible this romance stuff really was.

She received many texts and several missed calls. She read all of them, listened to all the messages. She couldn't bring herself to reply.

Lapis, when she was back from space, tried to help. So did Peridot. Wolf licked her face and was rather more insistent than usual in flopping down in her bed that night, a comfortable presence that smelled faintly of honeysuckle and fries.

_I have this to say on fusion, Connie, which is that it need not be confined to conflict but it should never be undertaken lightly. As I suspected at the time and later saw confirmed via Lapis and Jasper, you risk revealing much of yourself to your partner, and a flaw revealed can never again be hidden._

Connie read those words in her mother's journal a dozen times or more and each time it left her feeling like she had a brick of ice resting in her gut. Had she made a mistake? Had she revealed something about herself or learned something about Steven that they'd have been happier not knowing? Had they just managed to make a big deal about how fusion could be something better and then stumbled face-first into the same trap everyone had been warning them about?

Finally she apologized. She wasn't entirely sure what all she'd done wrong or how the heck she was going to make things right after. She wasn't sure how much of the blame belonged with Steven or what the two of them needed to do to move past all of this. But she felt awful and Steven felt awful and that made her feel more awful still and she needed it all to stop being so utterly awful and she apologized, in person, no less.

It was the first time she snuck out during her grounding. It was just that in that moment the need to be with Steven was so intense, so urgent that she couldn't not see him right then. And if that meant sneaking out, so be it.

She even managed to sneak back, though it would be weeks before Kiki stopped giving her strange looks.
Things calmed down to something mostly normal a couple of days after that.

But like the Sword of Damocles, the fact that Connie's sword was a wedge between her and Steven, that it was a fault line within Asmi, that fact hung over them both, a blade just waiting to drop.

It was during a Lutes and Loot session that something changed. Jeff's mom had just come home and put the game on pause while Jeff helped her carry in and put away the groceries. That said groceries contained the snacks for the evening meant it wasn't entirely altruism that drove Jeff hurriedly out the door. Jasper and Steven followed after to help too.

Connie was going to follow as well when she received a meaningful look from Peedee. She hung back instead, drifting back to her spot and fidgeted with the mini for her half-elven ranger.

Peedee straightened his notes behind his GM screen for a little before saying without looking directly at her, "So, I've been hearing about this thing with you and Steven." He glanced at the empty spot where Steven sat and added, "A lot."

Connie slumped a little. "Oh." Not really sure what else to say, she added, "Sorry."

The blonde shook his head. "No. I mean, okay, yeah, Steven was pretty freaked out for a while and there's something really depressing seeing someone eat fry bits while crying, but whatever, that's between you guys. Not my business, you know?"

Connie gave a timid nod. Then she asked, "So, what is this about?"

Peedee sighed, the gap in his teeth making it whistle. "If I've been hearing this right, you've got this thing where you think about it alot and when you do it makes you feel bad. Or sad. Or angry. Like, enough that it's been making problems for you and Steven and you and your super aunts, right?"

He straightened the corners of the screen he was standing behind so that they perfectly aligned with the lines on the map their characters were adventuring through.

Connie nodded. "Yeah, that's accurate-ish. I mean, there's magic involved too but..." She trailed off. "Why?"

He was in the process of flipping all his dice over to show the same number when he paused. "I've had to deal with some stuff like that before. No magic, obviously, but there's... stuff." He ended the statement staring into the middle distance.

Connie considered this. There was quite a bit Peedee didn't like to talk about and Connie had tried not to pry. You only needed to meet Ronaldo once to guess that things at the Fryman home had to be... interesting, but Peedee had this habit of lumping him and his older brother together when talking about 'having a difficult time with certain things.'

"You know what would help?" asked Connie cautiously. If nothing else, she was a little off-balance by Peedee talking about personal matters.

The door to the game room swung open and Jeff's mom came in, bags of snacks in her arms. "Rations to help you brave adventurers through your journey," she announced chipperly, depositing the spoils on the table.

Somewhere down the hall Jeff groaned out an embarrassed, "Moom." "Not so much 'what' as 'who,'" answered the blonde GM, offering a grateful nod to Jeff’s mom and already reaching for a bag of 'Maximum BBQ' Chaaaps.
"I'll be awaiting you once your, erm, appointment concludes," said Peridot, the gem claiming a plush red seat in the lobby for herself.

"Alright ma'am." Connie walked over and hesitated in front of the door. It had a plaque on it that read 'Dr. Becky Brooks' in somber letters though someone had taped a comic below. On it a bespectacled therapist was sitting in a high-backed chair with a pen and notebook in hand asking, 'What seems to be the problem?' Across from him, sitting on either end of a couch, were the mathematical symbols pi and i, the former saying, 'My imaginary friend here keeps calling me irrational.'

Connie glanced back and saw Peridot reading a magazine called *Mindful Education*, took a breath, and opened the door before she could hesitate further.

The first thing Connie noticed was how the room was nothing but couches and bookcases. All of them looked well-made and in good condition but no two of them matched. At all. The room was warmly lit by no fewer than five lamps of different sizes scattered about and the air smelled of tea.

Jeff's mom, that is to say, Dr. Brooks, was using a spray bottle to spritz a small aloe vera plant in a pot on top of one of the shorter bookcases. The short woman was wearing a pastel-patterned dress with wide sleeves, a polished amber ring on the middle finger of one hand catching the lamplight and seeming to glow. She gave Connie a slightly lopsided smile, a telltale scar visible to one side, but her expression was more than bright enough to compensate. "Hello Connie. Take a seat anywhere you like."

The walls of the room were busily decorated, mostly with floral prints or landscape shots. Some of the bookshelves were tidily arranged while others had their contents in heaps. It was as though someone had set out to make a room as comfortable and nice as possible while deliberately avoiding any unifying style.

Connie sat down in the middle of a couch the color of which was probably called something like 'rich amber' or 'burnt gold'. A faint hissing noise to her right revealed that there was an electric kettle plugged in on an end table, wisps of steam curling up from the spout. A plastic, bear-shaped bottle of honey and a bunch of packets of sweetener rested nearby.

Dr. Brooks set the spray bottle aside and said, "Would you like something to drink? I'm going to have some tea, but I have a mini-fridge with water or juice if you'd prefer."

"I'll take some lemonade if you have it." Connie wasn't particularly thirsty but that was hardly the only reason to seek out citrus.

"I'll take some lemonade if you have it." Connie wasn't particularly thirsty but that was hardly the only reason to seek out citrus.

Dr. Brooks gave an apologetic shake of her head. "No lemonade I'm afraid, though I can be sure to have some for your next visit."

She crouched down in front of a mini-fridge Connie had mistaken for an end table since the top of it had been colonized by a stack of what looked like travel guides to foreign cities. "The closest I have is orange juice or- Oh!" And she walked over to a bookcase which was doubling as a pantry for assorted tea flavors and small snacks. "I have a ginseng lemon tea and a squirty bottle of lemon juice if you think that will work."

"Oh, uh, sure," answered Connie and with that Jeff's mom busied herself with beverage prep. A minute later Connie was blowing on a teal teacup while Dr. Brooks got situated on a burgundy,
fleur-de-lis patterned couch that could probably be described as Edwardian.

She smiled at Connie, took a small sip from her own zebra-striped teacup, then asked, "Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?"

Connie was about to shake her head when she paused and said, "Um, is there a reason why everything in here is so... different from everything else?" She hoped she hadn't just insulted Jeff's mom's decorating tastes.

Rather than look upset Dr. Brooks smiled into her teacup. She sipped and set it down, saying, "That's very perceptive of you. And yes, it is deliberate. Some of the people who meet with me find disorder distracting. Having a nice talk over a warm glass of tea in a comfy room that happens to be mismatched can help normalize clutter. Plus if, say, something that looks like it might fall over is particularly uncomfortable for them-" and she gestured to a stack of books that was more haphazardly piled than most, "-then they can point it out and we can explore that concern of theirs. Maybe tidy it up and talk about how they feel afterward. It's not always easy to put your feelings and experiences into words so having an example present can sometimes be very helpful."

Connie took a drink of her very lemony tea and nodded. What had first looked like a strangely eclectic style now, upon second glance, must have taken a lot of work and forethought to arrange.

After it became clear Connie wasn't going to say more, Dr. Brooks quirked a smile and transferred a notepad and mechanical pencil to her lap. "So Connie, what would you like to talk about?"

Connie spent another second gawking at the very varied room, giving herself time to gather her thoughts, before she answered. "There's a power of mine which-" She paused. "Actually, um, do you know much about the Crystal Gems?"

"The mayor sent a number of very informative packets my way when Jeff and I moved here, which I made sure to read thoroughly. There's community training which goes into more... practical details about them. I've heard a lot around town; people were very forthcoming with information and advice when they realized I was a new resident and not just a tourist. And then there's what I hear from Jeff, who has some very knowledgeable friends," and Dr. Brooks gave her a wink, "in addition to semi-regular gaming sessions with Jasper."

Connie nodded. "Okay. Well, my mom," and her hand went to her gemstone, "was a Crystal Gem and I inherited the ability to do magic like she could. But no one is willing to-" Connie took a breath. "No one knows how to explain how half the magic functions and there's an expression in the house that 'powers are weird' and my magic only seems to work when I'm in the right mood. For example, I need to be frustrated to shoot electricity."

Dr. Brooks jotted down some notes and then looked up at Connie, urging her to continue.

"The problem is-" and Connie sighed, memories of her fight with Steven surfacing vividly. "-One of my most important powers requires that I be angry to use. Or, indignant maybe? Upset that others aren't listening to me and they're wrong and I'm right and my power is what'll let me fix everything."

Connie found her voice growing heated as she spoke and she was frowning by the end. She saw a bit of yellow reflected off of some of the picture frames and realized her gemstone had started to glow.

Another sigh as well as a brief head shake. The glow faded away. "I can't not summon my sword -- that's the power, by the way-- but it turns out that doing that makes me... unpleasant. I got in a fight
with Steven because of it and while I'm not sure, I think some of the arguments I've had with my family were made worse because I was, um, swordy." She looked at Dr. Brooks directly and pulled a face. "Does that make any sense? Everything is weird about my life so I don't know if you even handle stuff like this." Her cheeks were flushing and her power sink was starting to shift colors rapidly.

The therapist waited patiently for Connie to finish, her expression a mix of collected and friendly. "Let me know if I'm understanding you right. There's an important part of your life, a part of you helping in what is effectively the family business-" and she paused while Connie nodded minutely back, "-that engenders very strong feelings in you, feelings that lead you to behave combatively towards your friends and family. You'd like to separate these feelings from the activity in question so that you don't have to feel unpleasant at the same time you do something that's important to you. Does that describe what you're experiencing?"

Connie found herself taking a deep drink of her oh-so-lemony tea, not even stopping when it threatened to burn the inside of her mouth. She nodded in response as she swallowed.

Dr. Brooks' mouth quirked up into an understanding smile. "The magic part is new but your specific concern isn't strange. It's not uncommon for people in stressful careers --police officers, fire fighters, soldiers, doctors-- to have reactions like what you're describing, especially if there was a traumatic experience associated with it."

There was a sharp inhalation of breath and Connie realized a moment later that it'd come from her. The launch flashed behind her eyes, her own mental shout thundering in her ears: *Why won't anyone listen to me?! Why is everyone else. So. Wrong?!*

If Dr. Brooks noticed she didn't act like it, casually taking a sip of her tea and jotting a quick note on her notepad.

Connie cupped the teacup with both hands; the warmth that was seeping through her fingers and palms felt nice, comforting. "Yeah." She meant to say more but couldn't think of what else to say and simply repeated with a nod, "Yeah."

Shifting a little on her burgundy couch, Dr. Brooks said, "Alright. Well, to start with, I'd like to hear you tell me more about you and what you think is important. We're not trying to solve anything right now. In fact, I'm writing in pencil-" and she clicked her mechanical pencil for emphasis, "-because nothing you say right now is definitive. You said powers are weird. Feelings can be weird too so we're just going to explore what those feelings are and everything else will come later. Does that sound good?"

Connie nodded. Then Connie began to speak. Dr. Brooks listened and took notes, asking a few questions now and then. When an alarm like the tinkling of bells sounded Connie was shocked to find more than an hour had passed. And when Dr. Brooks asked if Connie wanted to schedule another visit, she was quick to agree.

--- October 8th ---

Connie stared at a piece of paper that had probably thirty words and faces scattered across it. The words were all for different emotions, things like 'frustrated' and 'mellow' and 'angry' and 'excited'; the faces were cartoonish, some grinning, others frowning: a scatter plot of feelings in text and art. "Go ahead and circle the feelings you're feeling now," instructed Dr. Brooks.
Connie started then looked up and asked, "How many do you need circled?"

Jeff's mom gave a casual shrug. "There's no hard limit, but three to five would probably be good for this exercise."

Once that was done Connie handed the paper and clipboard holding it to the woman across from her.

"Whenever you're ready," said Dr. Brooks.

Connie closed her eyes. Why won't anyone listen to me?! Why is everyone else. So. Wrong?!

There was a flash visible through her eyelids and a faint crackling noise. When she opened them she was scowling but it didn't matter, she could handle it. She looked at the blade in her hand. Yes, even if she had to do it all by herself, she'd be okay.

Jeff's mom's mouth was an 'o' of wonder. A few seconds later the therapist seemed to regain her composure, flashing Connie a smile that was equal parts impressed and apologetic. She looked like she was going to say something but thought better of it, instead putting a fresh copy of the previous sheet on the clipboard and holding out to Connie.

The whole, cozy room was bathed in a yellow glow.

Connie transferred her sword to her left hand, took the clipboard, and began circling.

--- October 15th ---

"-the Quartz Pack was a problem. They hurt people, even if it was less than you'd expect for how big and scary they were collectively. But I don't think the others really thought about how Amethyst would feel about the attack, or if they did they didn't think it was all that important. I mean, how could they and still think it was best to not even try and talk with her about-"

--- October 22nd ---

"-would be so much easier if I could see my own 'scape," huffed Connie, arms folded across her chest and leaning into her comfy couch.

"See your own 'scape?" asked Dr. Brooks.

Connie blinked. "Oh, right, I never told you about that. One of my powers is that I can see someone's emotional state laid out in a kind of colored fractal thingy. I call it a mindscape. Like, I could see how feeling insecure was affecting Lars' behavior the first time I discovered it."

"And Lars is..."

"He's the guy who works at the Big Donut."

"Orange hair? Ear gauges?"

Connie nodded.

"I-" Dr. Brooks took a sip of her tea, this time from a white mug showing snowmen huddled around a campfire and drinking hot cocoa. Connie wasn't sure if that visual contradiction was meant to be a prop to help with some therapy-related thing, like the cluttered decor, or if Jeff's mom just had a
really weird collection of coffee mugs. "I can see how insecurity would be present there," she said knowingly.

"The thing is, I can see it and my power just kind of tells me what it means. It even lets me make adjustments. Temporary adjustments," Connie added quickly, "and I haven't touched anything since I realized what I was actually doing. But it only works on other people, not me." She drummed her fingers on her knees, mouth becoming a pout. "It'd be so convenient if I could just look at the colored map of me to figure out what's going on."

When the silence stretched out past a couple of seconds Connie looked up from her lap, surprised to see Dr. Brooks staring at her, mouth open slightly. Even when Connie was talking about some pretty weird things, the therapist could be relied on keeping the conversation friendly and flowing.

Finally Dr. Brooks closed her mouth and gave a minute shake of her head. "Sorry for gawking. It's just, with a power like that, you'd have the makings of an amazing therapist."

Jeff's mom took another drink of her tea, a large one that finished the cup, gave another small shake of her head, and then picked up the session where Connie had left off.

--- October 29th ---

"-fell apart. Then we had this big fight. Really our first one," and Connie felt her cheeks flushing with remembered shame. "Unless you count the mushrooms and pineapple thing, but we weren't dating then. Anyway, I'm pretty sure fusion is a metaphor for a relationship, but one you can touch and talk to. So when Asmi split, that was proof that Steven and I disagreed on something so much we couldn't reconcile it. Which, now that I think about it, is what has usually happened after the others split apart while fused. That's another reason I want to get this sword thing fixed because Steven and I are really trying to convince the others that fusion can be better but if Asmi can't do this big, important thing then it undermines our argument and-"

--- November 6th ---

Connie walked up to the counter. "One order of fries and one order of spicy fries-"

"As spicy as you can make them," added Bismuth. The gem was Connie's escort out for a snack run. She had a golf bag over one shoulder, metal glinting within but it contained anything but golf clubs.

Peedee nodded, repeated the order, then called it back to the recesses of the fry shop. When no one answered Peedee flashed Connie an apologetic look then turned and yelled, "Ronaldo! Come on!"

"No time for fries, Peedee," came a distant voice. "A fellow truth-seeker has found something of grave import and Jenny needs to stop streaming music because it's making Fish Stew Pizza's WiFi super slow! The Truth is more important than-"

The sound of a door closing cut off the tirade and Peedee jogged back over, mustering another apologetic look for Connie. "I'll get those right out. One moment please."

Then, apropos of nothing, Bismuth claimed she had to go sharpen something and wandered off, the smith not even being subtle in flaunting her role as Connie's escort.

Once the fries were busy sizzling in their fryers, Peedee headed back to the window and said, "It'll be done soon." Then he glanced around, noticing the absence of Connie's rainbow-haired shadow.
He looked thoughtful for a moment and then leaned forward, Connie doing the same since it looked like he was wanting to discuss something sensitive.

"How's it going? The therapy, I mean?" he asked in a low voice.

"It's going fine, I guess. It's been a little over a month now." Connie stared into the middle distance thinking about what she could say to her friend about something they both had in common that neither of them much talked about. "Jeff's mom is a good listener."

Peedee nodded. "Yeah, she is. Isn't that room weird? I'm pretty sure I just stared at things for the first ten minutes I was in there. I was expecting therapists to be super organized and stuff."

Connie bobbed her head, suddenly thoughtful. "I was surprised too."

"Well," and Peedee's voice dropped a little lower despite the nearest person being some guy with a briefcase more than a hundred feet down the boardwalk. "I just wanted to let you know that it took awhile for me but it really has helped."

"Thanks. That's good to know. I'll try to be patient because-" She scratched at her gemstone without realizing it. "-Because I've been wondering when I'd be past this. I guess it takes time," she said, unsure how well she managed to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

There was a buzz from the fryers and then Peedee vanished back into the shop. From further in there was a muffled exclamation, something from Ronaldo though the only words she could make out were 'Conspiracy' and 'Truth,' both, somehow, spoken so that you knew they were capitalized. Then Peedee came back with two baskets of fries, one densely coated in red powder.

"Here you go. And, um, good luck. With things," said the blonde, pushing the baskets through the window to Connie.


A beat passed. Then Peedee peered out through the service window and craned his neck up and down the boardwalk. "Where did your rainbow aunt get off to?"

Connie, whose eyes were starting to water just from proximity to the heavily spiced basket Bismuth had ordered, said, "I have no idea. I'm just going to wander around and follow the trail of surprised people holding new katanas or something until I find her." Then she took the fries and set off, being sure to hold Bismuth's out a ways and always downwind.

Chapter End Notes

The in-chapter art was drawn by BurdenKing.

If you're wondering about Connie sneaking out, don't worry. That'll be covered in full in an upcoming chapter.

We'll see you Wednesday, April 10th for yet another exciting installment of Notes from the Undergrounded!

Over in the Discord's #CS-Theories channel TexasAndroid had some fascinating speculation that inspired the ever wonderful NeonJohn to design and draw the
hypothetical fusions of Connie and Jasper and Connie and Lapis. The former, **Fulgurite**, is described as a paladin through-and-through, crusading against injustice with lightning and the thunder of hooves. Hang on tight, Steven!

The latter, **Turquoise**, is described as playful, goofy, but capable of dramatic shifts in mood which are accompanied by her face/mask flipping to reveal her unhappy face. Powerful weather control with a penchant for both sunny days and thunderstorms.

A big thanks to NeonJohn for these superb designs!

If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

Connie Swap has an official Discord for the fans. [Come check it out.](#)
As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the Connie Swap Tumblr. Thanks for reading!
Window of Opportunity

Chapter Notes

As a reminder, there is a Timeline of Events for this episode that you can check out if you ever want to. You'll want to be mindful of spoilers to future chapters, but it's there if you want it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

--- September 19th---

Connie's spoon was lowered into the cereal bowl, coming up with only a single 'O' bobbing in the miniature pool of milk. With a motion so practiced it was done without any conscious thought, Connie raised the spoon to her mouth. It wasn't until the spoon bumped against a mouth closed into a grimace --spilling the milk and sole Cheerio down Connie's chin and across her shirt-- that Connie remembered she was still eating cereal.

Though she had to admit --setting her phone down and plucking free the soggy 'O' clinging to her gemstone-- that she was less 'eating' and more 'wearing' her breakfast. This was, after all, the second shirt this morning that would go milk-damp into the laundry hamper.

She set the spoon down and nudged the bowl back, giving up the breakfast as a lost cause. As soon as she'd finished mopping her chin, neckline, and gemstone with a napkin, she picked her phone back up and the grimace returned to her face. Yesterday Asmi had come undone in front of Jasper and Steven and Connie had fought about it. Connie's world had since transformed into a bog of anger, sadness, frustration, and reproach (self- and otherwise) and it was becoming obvious that a night's uneasy sleep snuggling Wolf like a big, yellow body pillow hadn't fundamentally changed that.

There was a loud exhalation and it took Connie a second to realize it hadn't come from her. Setting her phone aside, screen covered with all of Steven's read but unanswered texts, Connie glanced over her left shoulder to see Jasper sitting in her usual spot at the end of the couch. The Quartz was holding Citrine's journal, the book looking small in her large hands, and if Connie had been pressed just then to describe Jasper in a single word it'd be focused.

If she were allowed one more, she'd add the-personification-of-that-feeling-you-get-when-a-cable-is-pulled-tight-and-you're-kind-of-nervous-every-time-it-creaks-because-you're-not-sure-if-it's-going-to-snap. That last one probably wouldn't fly in a game of Scrabble but Connie couldn't think of an appropriate substitute.

Earlier that morning Bismuth had returned from whatever she'd been doing at the forge, a little sooty and in boisterous cheer. Said cheer had fizzled in contact with Connie and Jasper, the smith eventually excusing herself so she could go 'make sure the washer was fully disarmed.'

Just as well; the laundry was starting to pile up.

There was a chirp from her pink, indestructible phone and all other thoughts blew out of Connie's head so fast it should have fluffed the hair around her ears. Another text from Steven, a mix of worry, apology, sympathy, and emojis that Connie would read (and reread and re-reread and...)
without responding to. At least not until she got a handle on her own inner maelstrom and what she should actually do.

The Quartz and the half-Quartz sat there on the couch and at the counter, respectively, and each heaved their own sigh as they read.

There was a flash of light, the briefest flicker in gravity's pull, and then Connie was blinking in the light of day. As her eyes adjusted to being out on the temple's hand/utility room, grip shifting on the laundry basket in her arms, she heard the 'tunk tunk tunk' of robonoid feet atop metal.

Perched atop the dryer was Will, the ersatz robonoid's gaze following Connie's every movement.

There were only four ways out of the Beach House that didn't involve detonating a section of wall: the warp network, howl-portal, the front door, and the utility 'room.' The first two were monitored by Peridot, who could inspect the warp logs at will and who had installed listening devices that she assured Connie would only hear howling. “Even quiet howling,” she’d added, giving Connie and Wolf each a look. For the other two, there were the robonoids Will and Robinson, programmed to broadcast an electronic alarm if Connie tried to leave via the obvious exits.

Or, as obvious as you could call trying to leave through a free-standing laundry room suspended about forty feet in the air.

However, as Connie was allowed to wash and dry clothes (especially now that the machines were no at risk of exploding), Will only watched her hawkishly, making a little warning chirp whenever it seemed like she was straying too far from the warp pad or utilities.

Connie emptied the basket of clothes into the washer and started a load. Then there was a chirp, from her phone rather than from her robonoid jailor, and she was fishing the device out of her pocket while she all but ran for the warp pad.

Will beeped at the designated target but was ignored, the quarry vanishing in a flash of light. Then it turned to look at the artifact designated 'laundry basket' she'd left behind in her haste. The robonoid eyed it with suspicion, nudging it just in case it would unfold into a rope ladder or something else countermanded by the Maker's directive.

Nothing disallowed happened, but the Maker had stressed the importance of vigilance. It was why the robonoid designated 'Will' was positioned atop the rumbling machine hulks: to better survey the area. Using a short-range burst of radio waves, Will pinged its counterpart on the porch, Robinson, to confer about this development.

Several seconds of wireless correspondence later and the pair had determined:
1) the artifact was assigned a low-threat priority and therefore did not necessitate alerting the Maker, and
2) if rotated 180 degrees along the X-axis and kept atop the machine hulks, it could be used as a platform, affording Will a higher vantage point from which to maintain watch.

This second goal proved challenging, the basket being larger than Will and not designed with robonoid appendages in mind. However, hooking one limb through a gap in the side and exerting torque was eventually sufficient to flip the artifact over.

Will hopped up, the faint vibration of the activated machine hulk detected through the basket. Invisibly, Will and Robinson exchanged confirmations of a task well-completed, all in accordance
with the Maker's directives.

The robonoid made a full 360 degree turn, then focused its optical sensors on the warp pad. Yes, this heightened vantage would serve optimally.

Connie stepped off the warp pad and was having a very difficult time keeping her composure. She was about to look down again at Steven's latest text when she noticed-

"W-" It took her a moment to get her voice under control. "Where's Jasper?" she managed to ask, noting the empty groove in the couch where once a Quartz had sat. Citrine's journal rested on the coffee table nearby.

Bismuth was near the back of the living room, inspecting each of Connie's training sabers in turn and setting any in need of repairs in a pile.

"She finished that book and then was in a real big hurry to go on patrol," said the smith in a level voice. "You just missed her."

Under different circumstances Connie would be thinking this turn of events over--there were few, if any, subjects more sensitive to Jasper than her mom-- but right now she just couldn't muster the mental resources.

The memory of shouting at Steven near that very couch flashed through her mind.

Ever since the day Connie had returned to the Beach House, Bismuth had been eyeing Citrine’s journal like an armed explosive. No, that wasn't true. Bismuth had been excited to go work on the booby trapped washing machine. She'd been eyeing Citrine's journal like it was something much more dangerous.

"I've been thinking about-" The reluctance in the smith's voice was clear, which was a strange emotion to hear from her. "-About giving Yellow's book a read as well." There was a pause. "You said it was important."

Was she asking Connie to talk her out of it?

Connie nodded. "It is. I don't know if Mom intended for others to see it but Stev-" and her voice caught. She swallowed and tried again. "Steven and I think that it's important we all stop hiding things from each other. And that includes what Mom was doing."

Bismuth didn't really look happy at that answer and seemed about to say something more when Connie's phone chimed. Connie jolted as if she'd received an electrical shock, then looked at the screen. She stifled a sob and began to hustle for the stairs to her loft.

She didn't slow down until she was firmly ensconced in Blanketville.

There was the rattle of metal being picked up. "Seems like you'd appreciate some time to work solo, Alloy. I think I'm going to hammer the dents out of these and then-" A sigh. "-Maybe do a little reading after."

A roughly Connie-shaped lump of blanket nodded in response.

There were some heavy footsteps, the noise of the warp pad, and then there was silence.

Deep within Blanketville Connie's face was lit up by the glow of her phone.
More than a month ago Steven's cat, Lion, had jumped on his lap while he was texting, resulting in 'thsadbgisa1,' something Steven insisted was cat-talk for wishing someone hugs. It had been swept up into their vernacular, especially since they'd started dating. And here, seeing that, Connie was finding it hard to breathe. Or see through the threat of more tears.

Romance was terrible and fusion was terrible and she'd spent the last twenty or so hours lamenting both. But sitting there staring at that silly bit of gibberish on her screen, Connie felt something inside her snap. It didn't matter who was at fault for Asmi splitting in front of Jasper. It didn't matter if Steven owed her an apology or if Connie owed him one or if both of them had messed up. It didn't matter whether the warning about fusion in her mom's journal was relevant or not. What mattered was that Connie cared about Steven, Steven cared about her, and both of them were feeling really, really upset right now.

What mattered was that Connie needed to be there to give Steven that thsadbgisa1 hug right now.

Connie ripped the blanket off her. "Bismuth! Can you go to Steven's to-"

Bismuth was gone. Probably back to the forge, which, not being the laundry 'room' or the sky arena, was off-limits to Connie. And even if Connie had any idea where Jasper had warped, the Quartz' patrol had probably taken her miles away from the pad.

Hastily, Connie ran over to the warp pad and warped to the statue's hand. There she saw Will atop an overturned laundry basket, for some reason, the robonoid shimmying a little in time to the vibrations of the washer beneath it.

Warping back she ran to the front door and found Robinson staring at her from atop the patio table. A growl of frustration emerged from the back of her throat as she went back inside.

None of the windows opened and, after Bismuth and Peridot's fortifications, it'd probably be faster to blast through the wall than go through the window.

Actually, Connie thought loudly to herself, *I could go through the window if I could use my CP power*. After all, when she was see-through like that it was transparency alone that determined what counted as ‘solid’ for her.

Connie felt out with that indescribable sense of hers. She felt nothing and didn't turn see-through: if there was anyone around, they weren't thinking about her. She was alone.

She made another frustrated noise when the sound of footfalls on the Beach House stairs caused her to lapse into silence. Outside there was an electronic chirp followed by a man's voice. "Good day. Is one of the colorful guardianesses within? I have a phone case, yellow as the sun, and a flier for a local theater production, thrice-cancelled but risen anew because, uh, I want to use a phoenix metaphor here but I doubt any legendary birds of fire were rekindled by a generous donation of props from a retired musician's garage."

Connie zipped over to the door and yanked it open. Jamie and Robinson both hopped in surprise at her sudden arrival. "Hi!" she said with urgent energy. She grabbed the package and tossed it behind her without paying too much attention to where it landed --if that was the new case for her phone, as seemed likely, it was probably hardier than the boards the box was bouncing across.

Jamie, eyebrows disappearing under the lip of his post office pith helmet, started to extend a slip of
paper toward Connie. She swiped it, thinking she might have to sign something, but saw instead a picture of smiling and frowning theater masks. Whatever, that could wait until later.

"Thanks!" She slammed the door shut, heard the world go absolutely silent as a mindscape awash with aspirations and disappointments teased at the corner of her mind's eye.

Then she hurried up the stairs to her loft and made a diving leap through the window.

Jamie stood there for a few long seconds, staring at the door in front of him. Then he turned to the roughly spherical doorman, er, doorbot perched nearby. Man and droid shrugged in unison.

Will remained vigilant atop its superior perch, optics trained on the warp pad while auditory sensors picked up only the rumble of the machine hulk beneath it. The robonoid was shimmying slightly from the motions of the active machine hulk but its servomotors were able to compensate.

Robinson broadcast from the porch that the designated target had returned to the outer dwelling and therefore all was nominal. It appended that the artifact designated 'box' had been taken inside with the designated target, a setback to Robinson's own tertiary goal of using it to enhance its vantage in a manner equivalent to Will.

Will replied with an affirmation, its emotive-feedback signal adding a secondary message of comparative gratification, alternately designated 'self-satisfaction', alternately designated 'smugness': its perch was better.

Better but --if the telemetry from Will's internal accelerometer was accurate -- not wholly stationary. A consequence of inadequate frictional coefficient? A result of the active machine hulk's vibrations shifting it? Additional data was-

Suddenly the artifact designated 'laundry basket' was toppling forward, taking Will with it. Calamity!

The objected flipped 180 degrees along its X-axis causing Will to land within its garment holding space, an illegal operation as Will was neither an article of clothing or in need of laundering. The momentum imparted by Will's unhandled gravity exception error caused the object to slide forward, then teeter on the edge of the designated patrol zone.

Will issued a warning beep to the object as approaching the outer bounds of the patrol zone was both countermanded and flagged 'dangerous.' The warning was summarily ignored and object and robonoid fell out of bounds.

The internal accelerometer detected acceleration of nine-point-eight meters per second for one-point-four-eight seconds (estimated distance traveled: thirty-five feet) followed by a chaotic period involving sand, small rocks, the 'laundry basket', and Will, all moving in a highly unpredictable fashion while rotating wildly across the X, Y, and Z-axes.

Optics: offline; obscured by sand. Mobility: offline; Will's chassis had flipped 180 degrees along its X-axis and Will's gravity connectors were unable to find purchase. Situational summation: Will had slipped off the washing machine, fallen to the beach below, and gotten stuck upside down in the sand.

Report: Treachery! The artifact 'laundry basket' had been too subtle a trap for Will to anticipate. The patrol zone was unmonitored! The designated target could be escaping now! The Maker must be alerted!
Robinson broadcast a confirmation of Will's distress beacon, rebroadcasting the message to the satellite uplink so that the Maker would be informed. Robinson's emotive-feedback signal added a secondary message of comparative gratification, alternately designated 'self-satisfaction', alternately designated 'smugness': Will's perch was no longer superior.

It was the weekend and according to his texts, Steven should be home right now. Connie, breathless from her jog across town, was annoyed for the Nth time that she'd left her phone behind, dropped in her urgent departure from Blanketville. Still, even though she couldn't call, there was another way she could tell if he was around.

The world went silent, the sensations of Connie's body vanished (along with it, her panting exhaustion), and Connie saw... something impressive.

Impressive and sad!

Connie's resolve to see Steven redoubled in that instant, the scope of his distress literally visible before her. A small part of her was relieved that she hadn't been the only one emotionally body-slammed by their fight.

She considered ringing the doorbell and coming up after she was solid once more. But Lapis had spoken with Steven's parents; they knew she was grounded and they might feel obligated to let the gems know she'd snuck out.

She had no idea if Mr. or Mrs. Universe were around right then so she didn't feel confident traveling through a ground floor window to tiptoe upstairs toward Steven's room. Getting ghost-busted would probably make things ten times worse.

Without any better idea, Connie, still see-through, walked around the outside of the house just to see if Steven happened to be looking out his window. Unfortunately he wasn't, the ceiling of his room and the top third of some of his posters visible from Connie's low vantage point.

Actually... she couldn't climb up her force fields while she was like this; everything except her gemstone would just clip right through them. But if she went substantial again, climbed up there and then angled it right, she could probably ghost through the window. It's not like she risked getting hurt if she fell making the attempt.

A part of her wondered, as she scrabbled up a trio of inclined fields, if perhaps she was overreacting. This wasn't normal, right? It was hard to tell exactly since her main judge of normal were the Crystal Gems (who were anything but), television (same), and a small collection of human friends and family, none of whom she'd seen as heart-sick teens.

Then she remembered her mind's eye view of the vista that had been visible to her and she realized that this was probably how all teenagers felt in her situation, she just had the magical powers to do something about it.

Finally in position she saw Steven inside, sitting on the edge of his bed with his back turned to her, presumably watching something on his computer monitor, though what that was wasn't visible from her angle. He lifted something brown from a plate on his lap up to his mouth, shoulders slumped, head drooping. Even from behind, even without Colored Perception, she could tell that he was in a funk.

Leaning forward on her fourth and final field, Connie felt out with that indescribable sense of hers and...
"I'm sorry~" wailed Glum Glass.

"~Aaand I'm sorry too," sobbed Sniffling Croissant. The two Crying Breakfast Friends clutched one another and bawled, streams of animated tears pouring out while Steven had to rub a little moisture from his own eyes.

When he opened them there was a weird yellowish tint to his room. He blinked and rubbed his eyes again. Nope, still yellow-y. He chewed and swallowed the last of the banana bread Dad had brought him earlier as he mulled this over. Then the light shifted more, as though something transparent had passed in front of his bedroom window.

*Did, like, a balloon get caught in the tree outside? I mean, balloons probably float away all the time and they have to go somewhere so maybe-*

Steven's thought was cut abruptly short as Connie, see-through and literally radiant, came through Steven's bedroom window and toppled soundlessly into his bed.

Steven reached up and gave his cheek a little pinch to make sure he wasn't dreaming. Nope, not dreaming. Okay, so that meant...

"[Connie!]" he signed, pivoting around fully. It was a good thing he'd finished all the banana bread slices because it meant only crumbs were spilled on the floor when the plate fell on the floor.

Connie leapt up --he knew this was her cool, magical ghost power at work but it was still weird to see her standing on his bed without his bed dipping in the middle-- and she started signing back and she was sorry and she missed him and he was sorry and he missed her so much it made his tummy feel like it was full of rocks (and banana bread) and they both moved in for a hug and then remembered that was not gonna work and then Connie signed ‘t-h-s-a-d-b-g-i-s-a-1’ and Steven was confused and then he got it and somehow that just felt like the *perfect* thing she could have said.

There was a creak as Connie made Steven's bed dip and then the two were hugging and crying and a part of Steven was really impressed Connie had remembered how to spell ‘thsadbgisa1’ because he always had to copy-paste it from old messages and for the first time in nearly a day he felt like he wasn’t digesting rocks.

It was a long hug while in the background Glum Glass and Sniffling Croissant sobbed.

Afterward Connie started to talk but Steven held a finger to his lips and then signed, "[Mom's downstairs,]" then added, "[Wait? Are you ungrounded or something?]"

Connie shook her head. "[I snuck out. I've been so torn over Asmi and worried that we made the same fusion mistake everyone else has been making that I didn’t know what to say or do. But I realized that that wasn't important right now. I was miserable at you being sad and you were miserable at me being sad and that was awful.]"

Steven nodded while signing his agreement. It *had* been awful.

"[Fusion and being grounded and all that stuff can wait. You needed a hug and I needed to hug you.]" And then she did, pulling him into another hug, tighter than before, each burying their face in the other's shoulder.

For some reason, Connie smelled like Cheerios.
The "CBF" credits song was playing the background as the two separated. Steven scooted over to the edge of the bed and used his wireless mouse to pause the video before another one began.

"[How are you?]" he asked scooching closer once more. With "CBF" off he could hear the house music, an instrumental version of "Norwegian Wood" playing.

"[A lot better than I was five minutes ago.]" Connie gave him a half-smile, then settled with her back against one wall in the corner of his room, one hand resting on his knee.

"[Me too,]" and he grinned back feeling relieved but suddenly really tired, like how he got after saying goodbye to everyone after a training session with Jasper, the tiredness having politely waited until he was done to set in. He slumped against the other wall, his legs splayed out. "[Do you think we have a fusion problem like the others?]" he asked a moment later.

Connie shifted position, stretching her own legs out so they were draped across his. They'd sat like this lots of times since Connie had started coming over to his house to hang out. "[We have a problem. But-]" She sighed, one hand drifting up to her gemstone while she wasn't signing. "[We'll figure something out. I think the worst things we could do would be pretend like nothing happened or make this fight more important than-]" She gestured between the two of them. "[Us.]"

Steven had been resting a hand on Connie's ankle. He gave it a little squeeze before lifting his hand up to sign back, "[That makes sense. There's this thing Mom and Dad do sometimes where they'll be arguing about something and if it gets kinda bad then one of them does that 'time out' gesture you see refs do in football-]" and he used his hands to make a T-shape, right on top and horizontal, left below and vertical. "[And then each one will say in a cutesy voice to the other something like, 'You're wrong, I hate you, you smell bad, and everything is terrible.' Then they hug and go do other stuff for a while and talk about it later.]"

Connie seemed to think about that for a second before bobbing her head. She looked up at Steven with her pretty brown eyes and she smiled and said in a quiet voice, "Everything is awful, you're a-a dumb, dumb meany face and-" she chuckled shaking her head. The smile was deeper this time, brown eyes sparkling. "What happens when you can't call the other person smelly?"

Steven grinned back. "That happens sometimes too. When it happens to Mom, Dad usually says, 'You're terrible at being terrible.' Sometimes he'll make the joke-insults really silly to make Mom laugh."

Steven leaned in and gave Connie a peck on the cheek, saying softly, "You're terrible at being terrible, you fluffy kitten butt," a statement which earned a rich chuckle and a teary eye-wipe from Connie.

"Thanks for sneaking out to see me," whispered Steven and he ended with another hug.

The doorbell chimed making a light next to the door to Steven's room flash. He hadn't needed that visual aid since he stopped wearing hearing aids but he had been reluctant to take down it and some of the stuff like it. Plus, sometimes, when the world seemed too noisy, he'd put ear plugs in and go hide in his room and the doorbell light had been helpful in times like that.

Connie and Steven froze. There was the sound of the door opening and Mom saying hello. When they heard Lapis' voice answer back, Steven was pretty sure he'd just been zapped with cold electricity. From Connie's reaction, she'd felt something similar, flinching in his arms.

There was the door closing and the thumping of people going up the stairs, Lapis' voice becoming clear enough for him to hear, "-possible Will just tripped but we can't find girlie. Hopefully she's
just hiding somewhere in the temple being angsty or something, but, well-

"No, I understand," said Mom, her voice a little tired sounding. "Is Peridot out looking too?"

Steven looked at Connie, wide-eyed and fearful. He gestured to the window, adding the sign for question mark. Connie gave a curt nod and started to move toward it-

"She's circling around outside. If we don't find Connie here then we'll split off. I'm the one ringing the doorbell because Dot left her chill somewhere back in orbit," they heard Miss Lapis answer.

-but froze. Connie's eyes got wider and she looked around his room frantically. Then they looked down and narrowed. She gestured at his laptop and signed, "[I'm not here,]" all while snatching up the blanket from his bed.

With no time to think it through, Steven scooted over and clicked with his mouse, the *CBF* outro music playing.

There was a knock at the door. "Steven?" asked his mom. "Lapis wanted to talk with you for a second. Can we come in?"

Steven glanced back to find Connie hurriedly draping the blanket over her head, which really didn't look like a very good hiding spot but Steven just had to trust her. "Uh, yeah. Come on in."

As the door knob turned Steven remembered to try and look sad instead of scared.

There was the sound of his bed creaking and then Mom and Miss Lapis walked in. Both looked around the room. Steven, heart thundering in his chest, turned around to look behind him too and saw... a messy bed.

"Hey Pinkie," said Lapis. "Do you know where Con-con is right now?"

Steven blinked then shook his head. "No, sorry." He glanced around the room once more. "I really don't know," adding a beat later, "Really-really."

The *CBF* intro song began to play as another episode began. Lapis peeked her head inside his closet, then glanced under his bed, handing him the overturned plate. "Here ya go. Banana bread: good choice."

Steven took it, feeling a little numb. "Thanks. Dad made some." He glanced at Mom. "Sorry about the crumbs. I'll vacuum in a little bit."

Mom gave him a sympathetic smile. "That's a good idea. That way Lion doesn't start expecting floor snacks like he did back in the tour bus." Then Mom placed a hand on Lapis' shoulder and said, "I think we're done here. Sorry to bother you, sweetie."

Miss Lapis nodded, first at Steven and then at his mom. "Yeah. Later Pinkie," and closed the door after the two of them had stepped out.

Steven's sense of relief was profound, though confusion took up most of the rest of the room in his head. Steven paused *CBF* again and then looked around his room slowly. "Connie?" he said in a whisper, signing it too just in case she'd discovered how to turn invisible or something.

A moment later the bed creaked and Steven's blanket kind of *inflated*, a bulge that was Connie-lying-down-shaped rising in the middle of it. The girl tore off the covers and kicked them off the bed, inching back until she reached the wall.
"That was really not fun," she said in a quiet but intense voice, arms wrapped around herself.

"Welcome to Fish Stew Pizza," said a polite voice from behind the counter.

Connie backed into the restaurant, eyes on the sky. Then she shook her head, trying to focus on where she was. In her reflection in the shop's window she noticed some leaves in her hair, no doubt from when she'd had to dive into a bush to avoid Peridot helicoptering overhead. She brushed those out while Jenny's sister waited patiently behind the register.

With one last glance outside, Connie turned and walked over to Kiki. "Uh, hi. I-" She paused, then had to reach up and fiddle with one of her hearing aids, noticing the sound had gotten dialed too low at some point. Probably from the bush incident. "I'm here for the call-in order."

Kiki gave a professional smile. "Right, Steven phoned it in. One medium pepperoni and mushroom." She reached over and slid a pizza box across the counter, the smell wafting over Connie. She actually was hungry and, without realizing it, licked her lips.

Breakfast had pretty much been a bust, after all.

"Yeah, that's it," said Connie, finding a smile that hopefully didn't look too harried. "I'd like that delivered, please."

Kiki looked at her for a moment then picked up the pizza box and offered it to Connie, arms outstretched. "Here's your delivery," she said, chipperly but with a curious look in her eyes.

Gently Connie pushed the box back down to the counter. She shook her head. "No, I need it delivered to the Beach House."

Understanding lit up on Kiki's face. "Oh, because you'll be busy in town and someone will receive it there. Okay."

"No, not exactly." A beat. "Not at all, really." Connie rubbed the back of her neck. "I need the pizza delivered to the Beach House, which is where I'm going as well. Once I'm inside then I'll answer the door and pay you for the pizza."

"Are you locked out of your house?" hazarded Kiki, voice inflecting up with incredulity.

"Not... exactly. Look, it's weird, I understand but I can't go home until there's someone else at the front door and this involves magic and I can't have it be Steven in case anyone else is home and I'll give you a really good tip, I promise," she said pleadingly.
Another moment of musical silence then Kiki shrugged. "Alright. You're the customer."

The Pizza twin shucked off her apron, called into the kitchen area, "Going for a delivery run, Gunga," and tapped the step-tracker on her wrist to make sure it was still charged. "Will that be cash or credit?" she asked as she slid the pizza box into an insulated carrier.

First Connie had to climb and force field her way up to the part of the porch wrapped around the side where Robinson wasn't watching. That had been a tense affair, especially since every flicker of movement in the sky had nearly made Connie jump out of her skin. Even after the tenth gull sighting she was still twitchy.

Once she was up there and gave a wave, that was Kiki's cue to walk up the stairs with her delivery and knock on the door. Robinson greeted her with an electronic chirp but otherwise there was quiet, no one inside coming to answer the door. Good.

Then Connie had to wait for her existing fields to disappear before force field-scaling her way up to her own loft window. It hadn't seemed nearly so high up here earlier when she'd been diving through the window already insubstantial. But now, looking down and feeling the ocean breeze pushing against her, she felt much less bold.

Finally in position, Connie reached out with that indescribable sense of hers and saw... something that surprised her. She also dropped straight through her force field until coming to an abrupt (but painless) stop at chest height, her soft light gemstone catching on the field. She hung there, arms and legs limp, the girl momentarily suspended in an awkward position only really possible with copious amounts of magic.

Connie had deliberately angled the field down, with the bottom edge right up against the glass of her room. Slowly at first her gemstone slid down the field, not stopping when it reached the glass. It was a graceless entry, Connie scrambling up through the window, all while having to focus on her power but not get distracted by the surprising, patterned sight before her mind’s eye.

Finally she heaved herself inside, lying flat on a bed that could have been made of concrete for all it yielded under her. There was an instinct to pant for breath but she didn't seem to need either air nor rest while she was like this.

Getting up and giving the living room a quick survey --empty-- she jogged down the stairs and waited the roughly half a minute it took for her to become solid once more.

She opened the door. "Hi. Thanks for the pizza," Connie said as casually as she muster. She fished out her wallet and paid Kiki for the pizza, offering a fifty percent tip by way of thanks.

As Kiki removed the box from the insulated carrier and handed it over, Connie said, a little hesitantly, "Um, just so you know, I saw a lot of suppressed frustration in your mindscape. Like, a whole lot and most of it didn't look new enough to be because of all this."

Kiki took the payment and her expression shifted from puzzled to wide-eyed and then to a narrow-eyed glare. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she said brusquely.

Connie opened her mouth to say more when Kiki cut her off. "Do you need anything else?"

Connie shut her mouth and shook her head. Kiki turned and left, the tromp-tromp-tromp-tromp of her running shoes heavy on the Beach House stairs.

It occurred to Connie that Robinson, who was watching her closely, the little robonoid no longer
favoring the patio table for its perch like it had before, would probably notify Peridot that she'd been spotted at the Beach House. Connie needed to go find somewhere she wanted to be found, ready to explain why she might have been overlooked before.

After a moment's thought she grabbed a book and a water bottle and jogged over to the warp pad. A flash and a moment of weightlessness later and she was standing at the sky arena. She hoofed it up the stairs, already picturing the remote stretch of bleachers, hard to see from the summit, where she would claim she'd been the whole time.

Connie was surprised to reach the top of the steps and see Bismuth seated down near the arena floor, a book in her lap and a pile of sabers at her feet. Whu- came the corners of her mind, no part of her sure what to make of this.

As she slowly made her way down, Bismuth looked up sharply, one hand flickering as it started to assume the shape of something large and nasty looking. Before it could settle into weapon-form Bismuth recognized Connie and the hand reverted to normal.

"Hey Alloy," she said, her voice oddly tight.

The realization that, with Bismuth here, her alibi was toast washed over Connie. "Hi Bismuth," she said numbly while she slumped down near the smith. Absently she set the pizza box between them and opened it up in invitation. "Want some pizza?" She grabbed a piece for herself.

After all, there was no telling if she'd get to have Fish Stew Pizza again after whatever the penalties for sneaking out were leveled against her. Her mind started to go to a dark place when something tugged her back, too confused to get mired in despair. Connie blinked and looked over at Bismuth. "I thought you went to the forge."

The smith shook her head, rainbow hair swaying. "It's not a good place for stuff that can catch fire," and she waggled the book at Connie. "Plus-" and she turned to stare into the distance, "-it's probably not the best place to be reading about Yellow, know what I mean?"

Connie didn't, not really, but she nodded anyway.

"Is that spicy?" asked the smith eventually.

Connie shook her head.

Bismuth frowned, then looked at the book, then looked at Connie, or more accurately Connie's gemstone, then gave a defeated sigh. "Oh well. Sure, I'll take a slice. Thanks."

The two ate in silence for a moment. Finally, Connie asked, "Are you alright?"

Bismuth shrugged. "Not really."

Connie chewed and swallowed. "You want to talk about it?"

The smith said around a bite, "Not really." She swallowed. "But thanks."

There was a chime and a column of light speared up into the sky behind them. A moment later there was a nasally, "Connie? Are you present?!" and the sound of gravity connectors clanking against hard steps.

In a desperate, last-ditch idea, the words tumbling out of her mouth, Connie asked, "Would-it-be-okay-if-you-told-Peridot-I-was-here-all-morning?"
Bismuth swallowed and gave her a look of mild confusion. Then a half-smile spread across her face. "Of course. After all your help knocking the dents out of these sabers, why would I lie and tell Green anything different?"

Connie's grin probably reached her ears. "You're the best, Bismuth!"

Bismuth shook her head and chuckled, eyes glancing between Connie's gemstone and her face. "And you're something else, Alloy." Then the smith pivoted around and called up in a loud voice, "Hey Green! Alloy and me are down here. What's up?"

Chapter End Notes

I've started adding in-universe dates to these vignettes to make it easier for you fine readers to place events chronologically. If they weren't there when you read through chapters 1 through 4 and you're curious, consider going back and checking 'em out (especially for Ch4, which jumped a lot).

Moving on, there was intended to be a lot more to this update. There was going to be one or two more (shorter) sneak out attempts by Connie, complete with art, as well as the payoff to Jasper and Bismuth's journal reactions. There'd be a tease of a big, plot-relevant tidbit coming up in the episode and maybe even a brief heart-to-heart between Peridot and Connie. However, the seven days between Ch4 and Ch5 were not at all conducive to making any of that happen so I made the call to stop moving forward and expand what we did have to a fuller length. And honestly, even getting that much done was an accomplishment.

Part of the goal of Connie Swap's strict weekly release schedule is precisely so my co-creators and I are compelled to create even when life makes that difficult. The dream is that it'll make us all better at rolling with things and rising to future challenges. Still, proud as I am that this much went up, it's irksome when there's more to tell that didn't make it in.

Much of the stuff I mentioned above (e.g. Jasper and Bismuth's reactions to the journal) will find its way into future chapters in one form or another, so don't fret if you saw something and worried it was going to get cut forever. Regardless, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, of Connie very much acting her age, of her getting herself into and out of trouble by way of that rock in her chest, and that you'll enjoy what's coming next week.

And I hope this next week proves kinder to my co-creators and me.

If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

Connie Swap has an official Discord for the fans. Come check it out.

As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the Connie Swap Tumblr. Thanks for reading!
Every Cloud has its Yellow Lining

--- September 20th---

It surprised Bismuth sometimes just how green this planet could be.

It was overcast, even raining lightly, but the cloudline ended near the horizon leaving a strip of blue sky visible. That kind of diffuse lighting made all the colors stand out more, the green hills becoming downright verdant.

Bismuths didn't emerge knowing much about optics and she'd never bothered to learn, so the reason why this happened was a mystery. Maybe she'd ask Green about it.

Green seemed to know at least a little about everything. Like where Jaz had last warped on her patrol, which was why Bismuth was standing here getting drizzled on.

Of course the other reason she was standing here was knowing things she wasn't exactly happy to know. If that had been Yellow instead of Alloy coming down the arena stairs yesterday- and one of Bismuth's hands shifted into a morningstar, the spikes covering the surface long and sharp.

A distant flicker of motion caught her eye. Bismuth raised her weapon up to chest height, the better to shield her gemstone, and scanned the skies first. Rookies saw an enemy gem and focused on the obvious threat, but most gems couldn't hurt you from a distance. Enemy air support, however, could poof you and be halfway to the opposite horizon if you gave them a clean shot.

The cloud cover was thick overhead, though, so-

Slowly Bismuth lowered her arm, the weapon reverting back to a clenched fist.

Right. She had her head in the wrong millennia again.

Lowering her eyes from the no-longer dangerous skies, Bismuth saw a figure who could only be Jaz, jogging purposefully up a sodden slope a couple miles away. The orange-on-green was such extreme anti-camouflage Bismuth couldn't help but chuckle.

"A Nephrite could see that with one eye closed," she quipped to herself as she started after the Quartz.

It didn't take Jasper long to notice her tail. Blue would have cupped her hands to her mouth and yelled something snarky; Green would probably have flown over with that fragile tech of hers to meet her; Alloy would have waved, probably summoning a force field to keep the rain off her. Jaz just jogged to a halt and waited in silence for Bismuth to catch up.

"Do you mind if I patrol with you for a while?" asked the smith, a grin rising easily to her face.

Jasper gave a small nod yes and then inclined her head in the direction she was headed. A moment later they were jogging onward, both of them able to keep up a good clip for hours at a time. Longer, in Jasper's case.

If there was anything important out here they were jogging to, Bismuth couldn't think of it.

The rain began to pick up and the two patrolled on, unimpeded.

They were trailing the edge of a lake, heavy rain obscuring the far shore from view, when Jasper
looked her way, one eyebrow upraised.

Bismuth chuckled. "Well, since you asked..." The smith trailed off then, the humor draining from her face.

The world was the sound of falling rain and falling feet and Bismuth nearly turned to see whether Biggs or Snowflake were keeping pace.

"I read Yellow's journal yesterday," said Bismuth finally, one hand going up to push a wet dreadlock out of her face.

Jasper gave a curt nod. Her face was blank but when you'd known Jaz as long as Bismuth had you learned to tell the difference between her default stoic expression (or as Blue called it, 'resting poker face') and her trying to look unbothered. This was the second one.

"It's not resting level with me," elaborated the smith, the itch to pound something on an anvil rising. She glanced Jasper's way. "How about you?"

Curtains of rain washed over them, making the rest of the world seem indistinct. Finally Jasper answered in a level voice, "I hate Rose."

Bismuth blinked. It was hardly a surprise opinion coming from Jaz but it wasn't the response she'd expected just then. "Yeah?" asked Bismuth when it seemed like the Quartz was waiting for a response.

"Hated her during the Schism. Hated her before the Schism." Jasper's eyes narrowed as she jogged tirelessly onward. "Hated her when I served Pink Diamond." Booted feet squelched through sodden, green-green grass. "Citrine loved her."

Yeah, Bismuth's eyebrows had jumped up more than a couple of times reading the general's journal, a wordless, *This must have* really chipped Jaz' stone, flashing through her mind.

"She loved her through everything that happened. She died loving her." Her voice hadn't changed but Bismuth noticed that Jaz' hands had closed into fists.

"She hardly mentioned me," finished the Quartz in a softer voice.

They reached the far side of the lake. Without hesitation Jasper took a route that sloped upward. Bismuth wasn't sure if she knew exactly where she was going or simply didn't care.

There was a dry chuckle from Bismuth, about the only thing that was dry just then as the clouds poured down on them. "If it helps you feel any better, she didn't have a lot to say about me either."

She said enough, though.

*In Bismuth I saw another Rose. And like Rose, she had the capacity to split the Rebellion once more. She was well-loved and the promise of her Breaking Points would appeal to many, for war is hard on mind and body and to some, any peace was worth it, even if it was littered with the remains of fellow gems.*

*The Rebellion couldn't survive a second Schism; it had hardly survived the one.*

*I struck Bismuth down. I bubbled her and lied that she had been lost at one of the most stalwart of Homeworld's bastions here on Earth: the Ziggurat. Before I had Victory, I hid Bismuth where I hoped no one else would find her. After Victory, I hid her where I*
She'd read those words again and again at the arena. She'd hammered them into her mind. They may as well be chiseled onto her gemstone for all that she could forget them.

Without realizing it, one of her hands shifted into a serrated axe head.

"I wasn't a rebel," said the Quartz, her tone no different from if they were talking about the weather. "Not like you or Obsidian. Not like Lapis or Biggs. I was Citrine's and she led the Rebellion. That was enough."

"Yeah, and I made Yellow's shield out of talc," drawled Bismuth. She shook her head. "Come on, Jaz. Everyone rebelled for different reasons but we were all rebels. It's not like Homeworld only tried to shatter some of us," she said in an amused voice. After all, macabre humor was still humor. That got a brief grin before the stoic wall came back down. "I emerged and I was perfect. I served Pink Diamond perfectly. I triumphed over her enemies perfectly. But I couldn't defeat Citrine. We fought again and again. Dozens of times. She always won and she always let me go. Why? I would have laid her shards at my Diamond's feet if I'd had the chance."

Bismuth remembered those days, when Homeworld's rush job of a replacement Kindergarten had spat out this wrecking ball. Zircon's betting pool kept growing and growing; whoever brought down the Perfect Quartz would win big. Bismuth had asked Yellow once why she didn't finish the job; she wasn't even sly about it because by then everyone knew about their duels. The general had given her one of those smiles of hers, the one where she was silently laughing at a joke only she was in on, and said that she was trying to win more than just a betting pool.

"The perfect warrior failing again and again. It's what you'd expect fighting the Diamonds themselves." There was a diffuse waterfall coming off the end of Jasper's mane, the blanket of white hair catching a lot of rainfall in this storm. "But Citrine was fighting them. She was winning. The Beta Kindergarten wouldn't exist if she hadn't been winning. I realized my Diamond wasn't as perfect as Homeworld claimed." She jogged a few paces and then, "I didn't fail my Diamond. My Diamond failed me and there was a worthier gem I should have been serving instead."

For a moment Bismuth considered whether to be blunt or subtle, or whether to even ask the question at all. Then she remembered who she was talking to and felt a brief surge of gratitude for the bluff, orange Quartz. "You ever think some of that was Yellow... messing with things?"

Jasper didn't even flinch. "I thought about it. I don't think she did."

Bismuth's eyebrows rose in an honest display of curiosity. "Why?"

"She didn't need to. If you know someone well enough you don't need to trick them."

Something at the edge of their vision bolted, some four-legged organic vanishing into the curtain of rain. Jasper and Bismuth both paused, arms raising in readiness, habits formed of centuries of conflict coming to the fore.

The patrol resumed and Jaz elaborated her point. "If you attack Connie, Steven will defend her. No bluffing or persuasion needed; it's what he would do. She knew me. All she had to do was fight and win."

Bismuth pushed another sodden dreadlock out of her face. "That makes sense."

The ground squelched as Jasper turned, following a game trail turned into a stream coursing
downhill. Seeing her in profile like that, the rain blurring a few details, it made a suspicion Bismuth didn't realize she'd harbored rise to the surface. "Is your sleeve meant to be like Yellow's was?"

Jasper's right hand went to her sleeved arm but the gem didn't slow her patrol. She gave a terse nod and added, gesturing across her chest, "The top too."

This probably wasn't the smartest thing to say and it certainly wasn't the most tactful, but Bismuth sometimes liked to throw a punch, metaphorical or otherwise, just to see what'd happen. It kept life interesting. "It's not a great look for you," she said around a brazen smile.

*That* brought the Perfect Quartz to a halt, the gem turning slowly to give the grinning smith a piercing look. The two stood there, rain running down them.

In a voice only just loud enough to be heard over the weather, Jasper said, "The only foe Citrine never challenged and defeated was her poor fashion sense." There was a wry smile visible under an orange gemstone with rain dripping off it.

Bismuth's laugh was a percussive bark, erupting out of the gem without warning. She wanted to say something but her mouth was too busy guffawing just then and you couldn't tell the avalanche to pause halfway.

Jasper might have chuckled too but it was impossible to hear just then.

Finally, hunched forward, hands on her thighs for support, Bismuth stood back up, reaching up to wipe at her eyes despite that being entirely redundant in the deluge. "Hoo-hoo-whoa, jank me but that was perfect. Wow, Jasper: master of comedy." The smith shook her head. "It's true, though! She and Rose both just kind of did... whatever! I mean, who fights in a ballroom gown for a decade? Pink, that's who! And the general-" Bismuth snarled. "The general-" but she couldn't get it out between the giggles.

Expression completely deadpan Jasper said two words --"Grass skirt"-- that broke Bismuth. Broke her right down the middle. *Shattered by laughter*, thought the smith as she gripped her sides. *What a way to go.* It helped when Jasper joined in a few seconds later, like there was a certain amount of guffawing that had to happen for this job and the two of them could share the work.

"Citrine and I were poofed in the same fight," said Jasper after a million years of great, hooting laughter. "Citrine reformed first and when I saw her in that grass skirt I thought I'd been cracked."

"Really?"

"Snuck off later and dunked my face in Rose's fountain just to be sure." A beat. "Grass skirt was still there."

Bismuth made some more noises that, in an organic, would probably have meant it was suffocating. Finally, though, she managed to get out, "If you're bad-ass enough, you can wear what you want, I guess."

Jasper shook her head. "No. I'm bad-ass enough and I can't." With her eyes she dared Bismuth to contradict her.

Bismuth did not.

"I can't because I'm not above it. Citrine was. She had greatness. You fought her and you weren't fighting a gem, you were fighting victory personified. Gems wear clothes. Citrine wore glory; a
grass skirt didn't change that." She touched her sleeve. "This was an homage." She frowned. "Now it's a memorial."

Despite the rain continuing, a cloud parted in the distance that allowed sunlight to wash over them. The rain was a glittering cascade and the terrain would have out-greened an Emerald-Jade fusion.

"I never doubted Citrine," said Jasper her voice softening, sounding almost relaxed. She'd slowed down to a walk, the two of them taking the time to marvel at the view. "Everything I had, I gave to her: before the Schism; during; after; when there was no longer a war; when there was no longer a Citrine."

The gap in the clouds closed, that facet of the Earth rotating out of view.

"She wrote Connie about how she loved Rose," said Jasper, speeding back up to a jog, her voice hard again.

"She hardly mentioned me," she finished, voice harder still.

They patrolled in silence for a while. Then Jasper shot Bismuth a look that in combat would have meant, 'advance on the objective.' Here Bismuth took it to mean that she should go ahead, that Jasper didn't want to talk about herself anymore.

It took the smith a little to refocus, to stoke the fires of her own indignation. If she'd been talking with Blue or Green she'd probably work her way up to this. But with Jaz, she just went right out and said it.

"If we'd had Breaking Points, we wouldn't be worrying right now about those Homeworld elites coming back." Her voice was low and sharp like a sword to the gut.

"Maybe," said Jasper calmly.

"When I first came out of that bubble, I thought maybe Connie was Yellow. Hiding; some trick or tactic; I couldn't figure out why but I sure as schist recognized that gemstone," she said, her voice growing louder. "The general was full of surprises. I never could read her."

The other gem nodded. "Connie's not Citrine," she said matter-of-factly. "Took me a while to be sure of that," she added more softly.

"Right. But with Yellow gone, with the war over, with no one knowing why she stuck me in that bubble, I just decided to wall all that off and rebuild my life. The fight was over, Yellow won, and she wasn't around for me to argue with anyway." There was a stand of trees and the pair split briefly, one going left while the other went right.

When they reunited on the other side Bismuth shot Jasper a grin, the expression contrasted by the anger visible in her eyes. "Besides, my Breaking Point took out one Diamond and that's the sort of thing a gal can be proud of."

The Quartz murmured an 'mhm' in agreement and opened up a little space between the two, perhaps sensing what was coming.

"It turns out the war isn't really over," said Bismuth, voice acerbic. "And Yellow left a nice little note explaining that she couldn't trust me not to jank it all up!" she barked out, her voice growing steadily louder. "Time to tear down those walls and start that argument again!"

There was a low rock wall ahead, rectangular stones stacked instead of mortared. Jasper hopped it
without slowing down. Bismuth's hands formed into mauls and she swung low, pivoting her shoulders with the swing to put all her force and weight behind it. "Rrraaa!" There was a satisfying smash, debris flying out from the impact site.

Turning around, Bismuth made two more swings, punching another hole through the rock wall with the first and then smashing the part between the gaps with the second. "We could have won! We could have liberated everyone!"

Jasper waited patiently while Bismuth knocked down another section then shifted both hands into picks and shattered some of the larger stones scattered about. The ground was churned into mud, mud that went flying along with bits of stone, more than a little splashing across Bismuth's legs, arms, and apron.

"Maybe," answered Jasper.

Bismuth swung around to face the calm voice, a snarl on her face that revealed clenched teeth. She might have taken a shot at Jaz just then if she hadn't seen how sympathetic the Quartz' eyes were.

"We won with one Breaking Point. We'd have won faster with two? Ten? A thousand, right?" asked Jasper, summarizing.

Bismuth nodded.

"Rose thought we'd win with none. She was wrong, but she believed it enough for the Schism to happen." Jasper's hand curled into a fist as she spoke of the rival general. "Shattering Pink Diamond made Homeworld retreat. To corrupt the planet and leave. If we'd shattered Blue Diamond too, or Yellow, they might have done worse. Gather the whole armada and boil off the oceans. Keep dropping asteroids until the mantle cracks."

"You can't know that. Yellow couldn't have known that!" Bismuth's arms were flung out wide and she was shouting despite Jaz being right there.

"You're right." The Quartz was a pillar of calm, only her eyes showing that hint of sympathy. "All we know for sure is that Citrine won."

Bismuth let her arms drop, broad shoulders slouching as she let the rain and Jasper's words wash over her. She'd gotten red hot and hammered out her argument. Now it was time to quench it.
"One Breaking Point plus one Citrine minus one Diamond equaled one Earth?" said the smith, a little mirth entering her voice.

"Yeah." Jasper let the corner of her mouth curl up slightly. "Adds up right."

Bismuth kicked a stone, punting it somewhere into the drenched, verdant distance. She shook her head, water sloughing off her dreadlocks. "Is it wrong that I want to punch Citrine in the face?"

"Yes," said Jasper immediately.

"No," she said a little later.

"Maybe," she finished, sounding much less sure of herself than usual.

Jasper started moving once more, Bismuth jogging alongside. The ruined section of wall faded into the distance. When they came to another low fence, this one made of wire stretched between wooden posts, each of them simply jumped it and kept moving.

After a time the rain started to taper off, indistinct figures in the distance clarifying into hills, walls, and a few, squat human buildings. By the time it was back to a drizzle, Bismuth asked, "If I'd given you a Breaking Point during the war, would you have used it?"

"No." About ten paces later Jasper amended, "Except on Rose."

"Yeah. That's what thought," sighed Bismuth. Jogging a little closer she reached out and clapped a heavy hand on Jasper's shoulder. "Thanks for the talk."

"Better?" A one-word question that asked volumes.

"I think so. You're right that there's no going back and finding out." Bismuth mopped her face and hair, wringing the water free. "There's only what comes next."

Jasper nodded and then turned, nearly doubling back the way they came. She started to jog down the slope, the ground squishing underfoot.

"You going somewhere?" Bismuth was only ever a few paces behind. It's not like she had anything to do out here, unless she wanted to go rebuild a section of fence.

"Home." A one-word answer that spoke volumes.

A glance confirmed the downpour had washed off the mud she'd splashed on herself. "Yeah," said Bismuth. "Me too."

When they reached the warp pad Bismuth didn't step on with Jasper. The Quartz paused for a second, looking her way, then nodded and disappeared in a flash of light. Bismuth vanished in a separate flash a few seconds later.

A wave of volcanic heat washed over Bismuth and before long wisps of steam were rising from her hair and clothes. Stepping into the forge, Bismuth breathed in the smell of metal, heat, and outgassing magma. Ahhh, this was better.

In a container gleamed ingots of silvery material. If you'd held it up to Citrine's shield you'd find the color and texture identical. There weren't many ingots because making this stuff, or making it really high quality, took time. Some stuff you couldn't rush.

She'd been building up a stock with the general idea of making a suit of armor for the new fusion,
Asmi, once she had enough material.

The others pulling a Diamond Authority on Alloy? It was only a question of when that'd collapse in on itself, not if, which meant that sooner or later Asmi would be around again and Bismuth thought they'd look really nice in some high-quality half plate.

But now, Bismuth had another project in mind. No rest for this smith!

"-the elliptical will flatten into a stable orbit with properly vectored thrust."

Jasper stood on the warp pad and surveyed the space around her.

Connie was sitting at a desk in the middle of the living room, pencil in hand and taking notes. Peridot stood a little ways distant gesturing at holograms of equations and diagrams, a simulation of objects orbiting or crashing into the Earth visible in one corner. Wolf was crunching kibble in the kitchen. Citrine looked over them all serenely from her portrait above the door.

Seeing her general made Jasper's form ache, like being stabbed but worse. Jasper had been stabbed many times, had been blasted, slashed, crushed, and immolated and had endured it all with bottomless resolve. But this? This hurt.

Apparently this also showed on her face because Peridot had gone silent and Connie was looking at her with concern.

Jasper met the girl's eyes, resisting the urge to glance down at the gemstone below. She'd come home for a reason and this was it: it was an open question what exactly Citrine had felt toward Jasper, but there was no question that Connie loved her. It was a different love --not Arwen's love of Aragorn, and not Samwise's love of Frodo; maybe like Frodo's love of Bilbo-- but it was no less important.

"I think we have reached a satisfactory place to conclude for today," said Peridot a little slowly, the gem pulling her gaze away from Jasper. She began dispelling the holographic displays. "Please complete your assignments in time for lessons to resume the day after tomorrow."

Connie nodded absently, then paused as she was sliding papers into her pack. "Is something happening tomorrow, ma'am?"

Peridot answered excitedly back. "I believe it is well past time we examined your newest power manifestation more fully, and I think we will need the full day to plumb the depths of this one."

Another nod and then Connie stepped clear from her desk and walked over to Jasper. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," answered the large Quartz. She crouched so she was at Connie's height. "Lute's and Loot?" she asked.

Connie frowned. "The next game isn't for another four days. Also, there are a few pieces of Samwise we haven't been able to find and Jeff has this crazy idea but-"

Jasper lowered her hand, interrupting Connie because four days was entirely too long for the Quartz just then. Patience was a virtue she possessed in abundance... just not today. "Warriors of Literacy?" she asked.

Connie took a second remembering their long-suspended book club. Then sympathetic eyes looked
out over a wide grin. "Sure. Just let me put away my lesson stuff and we can get started."

The girl jogged across the living room and up the stairs to her loft. After stowing a few things she paused and looked in Jasper's direction. "We don't have a new book picked out, do we?"

Peridot, meanwhile, tractor beamed the desk into neat position along one wall, then walked past toward the kitchen, her floating fingers ahead of her opening cabinets and readying cookware. The crunch of kibble stopped and then was replaced with an excited panting.

Jasper stood back up and shook her head in answer to Connie's question.

"Any preferences?"

"Your choice," was the Quartz' terse response.

Connie looked over the bookshelves behind her bed then seemed to think of something, her expression growing distant. Slowly, reverently, she withdrew a large, hardbound book. She met Jasper at the couch a moment later.

Connie ran a finger gently across the book's cover, *The Tale of the Hero and the Companion* written across it in flowing script. "This book's is extremely important to me," she said softly. "It's also one of my favorite stories. And maybe it could be one of yours too; there's some elements about it that I think will really speak to you."

Jasper nodded, smiling a small but genuine smile, feeling truly comfortable in her familiar couch groove with Connie beside her. She started to reach for the book but stopped when Connie flinched a little.

"Sorry," apologized the girl. "It's just, this is a, um, special edition."

"Can't get another like it?" asked Jasper.

Connie looked like she was blinking back tears just then. "No." She sniffed. "No I can't." She blinked a few more times and then looked up at Jasper. "Please be really careful with this."

Slowly she thrust the book toward the warrior. "Really, really careful."

Jasper, holding Connie's gaze, nodded meaningfully. Oh so gently she took the book, then turned it over in her hands. "Who's the author?" she asked as she opened to the first page. She hadn't seen a name printed on the cover or spine.

Connie scooched a little closer, leaning in to the Quartz to get a better look at the text. "It's... a surprise."

Jasper looked at her for a second and then gave a small shrug, her eyes falling to the page. "'The Tale of the Hero and the Companion. Chapter one,'" she read. "'There was once a hero, a girl of many virtues who would one day accomplish many things. And there was a companion who, by the vagaries of chance and destiny, came to be...’"

The two read, taking turns narrating as they went. When Peridot brought Connie's meal over, she insisted on eating it at the couch while Jasper read on. And when, later that night, Connie had to go to bed, it was with some difficulty that Jasper kept from reading further on her own.

It was a really good story.
Accepting that some days just weren't good days for patience, Jasper went to her room. She went to her room and, for the first time in a very long time, she laid down, getting comfortable. She drifted off beneath the dim glow of yellow bubbles and dreamt of the hero she'd once served herself.
Power Testing: Colored Perception

Chapter Notes

After you finish reading this chapter, there is a related omake story you might want to check out:
Colored Perception is NOT Covered by the Warranty by Wierdkid20 - After the testing is over Bismuth learns she needs to up her standard of indestructible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

--- September 21st---

That morning was overcast and threatening rain, a fact Connie lamented over her now-yellow phone (Peridot had replaced the old, pink case with the new, yellow one and painted the rest of the phone to match) with Steven. Her boyfriend promised to bring rain gear with him when he could make it.

Overhearing this, Lapis muttered 'Hold my beer' (handing Connie a can of soda) and stepped out onto the patio. She then made some broad hand gestures reminiscent of a police officer directing traffic.

A minute later there was a vast circle of blue sky surrounding Beach City. The omnipresent rainbow shone, visible once more.

"Everyone complains about the weather but I'm the only one that gets off my shapely behind to do something about it," said Lapis breezily, reclaiming her soda and taking a satisfied drink.

Peridot, the ersatz robonoid Gort, and Jasper emerged from the workshop inside the temple, the latter visible only as two legs and orange hands hidden behind the massive piece of equipment she was carrying. It was a giant, circular, metal-reinforced glass tank like a maximum security aquarium, with the thick glass obscuring Jasper to little more than an orange blur. She trundled across the living room and vanished on the warp pad.

A moment later there was a thud outside and Connie ran to the window. Jasper was walking the tank across the sand below, having warped out to the laundry room hand and jumped down.

Peridot followed her over to the window. After seeming satisfied that the tank had survived the descent unharmed, she glanced up at the circle of blue. "I suspect I'll be getting a cross call from the Delmarva weather services later but I nonetheless appreciate the assistance. Thank you, Laz."

Lapis winked and shot a finger gun back. "I keep telling them they should do that thing you hear at the end of prescription drug commercials where they say super fast, 'weather-prediction-accuracy-subject-to-hyrdokinetic-veto-please-consult-your-Lapis-Lazuli-for-details.'"

"Ah yes, your 'blue asterisk' suggestion," said Peridot wryly. "I'll be sure to pass it along to them should they contact me."

More hustle, bustle, and dramatic jumps down to the beach by Jasper later and the group was assembled. The one robonoid (Will and Robinson were still at their posts, though they'd
begrudgingly allowed Connie to leave since she was properly escorted), Lapis, Peridot, Wolf and 
Connie were present. Bismuth was absent, away doing... whatever she was doing after she'd split 
off from Jasper yesterday. Steven would come as soon as he got out of school. And Peridot, tractor 
beaming a sealed crate of equipment over, said that Jasper had left to patrol and wouldn’t be back 
for several more hours.

Somehow Gort had acquired a clipboard and pen, the robonoid handling each with surprising 
ability considering its stick-like limbs.

The first test was how exactly Connie activated her power.

Connie was able to detect the mindscape of Lapis, Peridot, and Wolf’s but not the robonoid’s, 
even when Gort rather enigmatically insisted on riding on her shoulder. Then gems and hound 
fanned out, fifty, a hundred, and a hundred and fifty feet removed from Connie, respectively. Just 
as stoically, Gort dropped to the ground when an insubstantial Connie proved that she could 
reliably peer at mindscape no further than a hundred feet away.

At one point Lapis hid behind the sealed equipment crate fifty feet away. Connie was told to look 
straight forward while Wolf, a rawhide bone in his mouth, padded a dozen or so feet behind her, 
the hound audible but not visible. When she activated her power again she was able to detect them 
both.

Lapis was seated in a chair, her back to Connie. She was told to think of Connie but not turn 
around. Connie was able to see her mindscape out to the usual distance. Then Lapis was given a 
new issue of one of her mangas and soon after Connie was unable to detect her mindscape any 
further, the blue gem engrossed to the point that she’d forgotten about all else.

Gort, dripping from emerging from the surf, then walked over on three legs with a crab pinned 
against its chassis with the fourth. The robonoid only released the crustacean after Connie 
confirmed she wasn’t able to detect it's mindscape either. The clipboard appeared soon after, 
followed by the scratching of notes being taken at calf-height.

"Are you certain you can't detect any further targets?" asked Peridot.

Connie checked once more and then shook her head. With Steven gone, she had no one she could 
use sign language with, but nods of 'yes' and 'no' still worked which was handy because it took 
about a minute between her 'letting go' of the power and her becoming solid once more.

Then Peridot, soundlessly because Connie was still immaterial, walked over to the crate of 
equipment and knocked on the side. Jasper, equally soundlessly, burst out of the container.

Connie was dumbfounded but she did notice the immediate addition of another mindscape. She 
couldn't hear Lapis make the obvious Kool-Aid Man comparison but she could imagine it clearly.

A surreptitious Lapis-flight to the roof of the Big Donut confirmed that Connie couldn't bring up 
the mindscape of either Sadie or Lars despite them being nearby and her knowing for certain they 
were in there.

Conclusions: the target had to be within about a hundred feet of Connie. She had to be aware of 
them or thinking of them and they had to be aware of her or thinking of her.

"Proud, curious, a little nervous-" Steven paused in following Connie’s signing, having been flown 
to the beach by Lapis during his lunch break. "She says more nervous now, oh, and self-
consciousness and-"
"That is more than adequate," remarked Peridot, "for the emotional discernment. But what was I thinking about?"

Steven signed this to Connie, who tried to scratch her head and ended up poking through it instead. Finally she signed back and Steven translated allowed, "About... science?"

Gort turned from staring at Connie to writing in its little clipboard. Steven suppressed a squee.

Peridot shook her head. "No. I was thinking about how far Connie has progressed since her thirteenth birthday. Though maturation is explained through science, as is the progression of time so—"

"Yeah, no," drawled Lapis, the gem in a seated position but supported by nothing save the flapping of her wings. "Save the science poetry for Sagan, Dot. Girlie can't read your thoughts, just your emotions. Which, if you spend more than two seconds thinking about it, is the best news ever. For everyone. Connie especially."

Nearby Gort marked an 'X' on the clipboard.

The cage was made out of the same material as the coffee table, so heavy it had started to sink into the sand until Peridot had laid down broad sheets of particle board to spread the weight out. That worked, though the cracks and pops from the strained wood meant the boards would probably not survive the testing.

Jasper stood inside the cage and Connie was wondering if the cage would survive the testing. Everyone else too, she added inwardly, glad at least that Steven had returned to class.

"Go ahead, dear," prompted Peridot.

With a sigh and a nod, Connie went immaterial and saw...

Spirals of orange, white, and black spread out to an infinite horizon. Titanic forces in pattern form were coiled within: rage, sadness, aggression, patience, love, hatred, certainty, and doubt, all contained by absolute barriers of self-discipline. Marks, so many marks, and in places the pattern was blasted.

While she was like this Connie suffered from a kind of double vision. With her eyes she saw Jasper standing patiently within the cage, idly scratching her sleeved arm. Meanwhile, in her mind's eye she zoomed in at the sprawling 'scape, where it almost looked like one of the blasted spots had-

Lapis nudged Connie, or rather, Connie's gemstone, jostling the girl.

Right. Even accounting for how distracted she got like this, she was delaying. She nodded to Lapis and then turned back to the pattern. With a tweak-

Jasper was wide-eyed, head casting about for threats. In Lars that had inspired a blind panic followed by a shrieking retreat from the Miller house. Jasper apparently handled sudden, extreme fear with more stoic dignity.

Peridot and Gort looked up from their clipboards and gave Connie the nod to proceed.

That Jasper had volunteered, that it made complete sense to test these things, and that there were countless marks already present in the vista Connie could see only helped so much. There was a mark there now, made by Connie, that would be there forever. She couldn't actually feel queasy
Pushing past that, Connie found something harder to adjust. Much harder. Tens of minutes passed, oh-so-slowly pulling the fractal pattern into a subtly new but significant form.

Connie couldn't not look when she was like this: her eyelids were see-through after all. But she finally paid attention to the world in front of her and saw Jasper... gabbing. Wolf had backed away, his ears down flat. Lapis had retreated, looking decidedly unsettled. Even Peridot all but hid behind her clipboard a distance away from the Quartz who had had her reticence dialed way, waaay down. Instead the Quartz was crouched low talking and talking to the stoic Gort, the robonoid making regular head nods.

From her mind's eye she could see the pattern steadily reverting. In her journal, Citrine had mentioned that the changes would undo themselves faster the more counter they ran against the target's personality. This was in line with what Connie was seeing now.

Peridot, she knew, had listening software running on Gort, tracking the number and speed of words coming from the Quartz as a way to quantify the change and subsequent reversion. A few short minutes later and the pattern was looking much like it had originally, Jasper having all but stopped talking, though Gort continued to nod its head regardless.

Finally, after a full minute of silence, the robonoid reached out and patted Jasper's foot with its limb, then scuttled back to Peridot. The data was transferred for subsequent review.

Lapis was about to give Connie's gemstone another nudge when Connie waved her off. They'd tested how quickly she could make changes. Now they needed to test the magnitude of those changes. And since massively altering Jasper's fundamental emotional pattern would be grossly unethical, that left something more transient.

There were three emotions that were easy to induce: fear, panic, and rage. Dialing up fear or panic to max seemed too cruel. Which only left...

Connie really hoped that cage was as sturdy as advertised.

Connie couldn't hear but she could feel. It was a muted thing because all the world had the texture and consistency of concrete, but even Connie felt the vibration when Jasper lunged at the bars so hard it made the cage flip a full ninety degrees and faceplant into the sand. And though she couldn't see into the cage anymore, the former cage-top now obscuring her view, she could feel a tremble like aftershocks through her feet. The cage, made of a material said to be able to withstand a meteor impact, rocked and convulsed.

When an orange arm punched through one of the bars, Peridot tried to grab Connie with a tractor beam and found it couldn't grip the insubstantial target. Another bar exploded outward, rent from the frame, and the cage rocked with even more intensity.

Lapis tried twice, blue arms blurring through Connie without finding purchase, to grab ahold of the girl, her wings already outstretched and ready for flight. Then she shook her head at herself and gripped Connie's gemstone, the girl propelled as inexorably as if seized by an unstoppable force.

Just as a third bar shattered and Jasper started squeezing through the opening, a swirling vortex opened up below, Quartz, cage, and particle board falling into it and vanishing.

Connie looked at Wolf then followed his gaze outward. There was a splash faintly visible on the horizon, in the shaded part of the ocean out past Lapis' circle of blue skies. The waters churned for
a moment, frothing violently, and then went still. That didn't actually make Connie feel safer.

Peridot, who had scooped up Gort and helicoptered up, finally landed after five minutes had failed to produce further sign of the enraged Quartz. After Jasper's 'scape had vanished, Connie had switched to examining Lapis', not wanting to become substantial while held by her gemstone forty feet in the air. It was for that reason that she could see just how deeply worried and unsettled the display had made Lapis feel. Honestly, Connie felt the same.

A little later the gem lowered them both back to the beach.

Several minutes passed and Connie was material once more when Jasper emerged from the surf. She was calm, even a little embarrassed, the twisted wreckage of the cage gripped with one hand and dragged behind her.

As Peridot had speculated back at the Beach House days ago, while Connie was peering at someone's mindscape she was no longer flesh and blood. Whereas Citrine had become soft light, the same stuff of Peridot's holographic displays, Connie became light. The regular kind. Her gemstone was the only exception, becoming soft light just like it had for her mother.

Soft light only barely interacted with matter: Peridot's displays could make and detect sound, for example, but even a butterfly could flit through one. It did, however, interact with hard light just fine, which was why Citrine had needed a shieldbearer during the war: to the hard light of gem bodies and gem weapons, a soft light Citrine was every bit as tangible.

Light, regular 'shining out of a flashlight' light, didn't interact with hard light, soft light, or matter. At least, not in any meaningful way at Connie's scale. Which was why she couldn't hear, she couldn't produce noise, she couldn't pick something up, and nothing could touch her.

A fact Lapis was gleefully confirming by pounding a crater into the sand where Connie stood, water fist rising and falling in big, sweeping arcs.

That one sweep had passed through Connie and swatted Jasper back into the surf, and that another one had splashed water over Peridot and Steven (now done with classes for the day) was entirely 'accidental'.

Connie didn't need to be able to see Lapis' mindscape to know those were lies, though lying did show up on an emotional level, something Connie was beginning to recognize.

Then Lapis had swept up a bunch of sand, the swirling particles turning the hand into an opaque mass of water, and suddenly Connie was flying. She hit the water without a splash, without so much as slowing, dropping to the sandy bottom of the bay at nine-point-eight meters per second of acceleration.

Fortunately, Connie was lighter than a feather. Literally. Peridot's scale hadn't detected a statistically significant weight for Connie, even at maximum sensitivity; Connie somehow had inertia but effectively no mass. As such, landings were harmless.

Connie picked herself up, the fact complicated by being unable to push against her own see-through body, and looked over at the Quartz wading across the bottom a little ways distant. Jasper, still finding her way back to shore from Lapis 'accidental' swipe, gave Connie a look that, to her, said, 'You okay, squirt?'

Connie nodded back and the two started walking forward, the water no more substantial to Connie than the air had been. Then there was a shudder and the ocean fled, curling back like a carpet rolled
by a titan. Lapis and Peridot flew out a beat later to rescue the submerged girl who had failed to surface.

Light did interact with matter, soft light, and hard light in one specific, overt way: if it was transparent, it would go through, and if it was opaque, it wouldn't.

Peridot had summoned a poster board-sized hologram and dialed up the opacity to maximum. It had all the weight and durability of a soap bubble. Connie shoved against it with all her might, even stepping back and taking a running start to ram it with her shoulder, but it may as well have been anchored to the firmament for all that it budged.

At lower levels of opacity, Connie found the plane more like jello, something she could slowly and with difficulty squeeze through.

Her soft light gemstone meant that force fields, even clear ones, were obstacles if at chest height. Gort was following after Connie, who breezed through a two-foot high barrier without slowing, the robonoid bonking into it and determinedly trying to continue trudging forward.

There was a six-foot tall pane of glass, held vertically by a stand Peridot had built. Hanging from it were Venetian blinds. These opened, Steven becoming visible on the other side, one hand raised to fiddle with the little cylinder that adjusted them. He blew Connie a kiss, one which she mimed catching.

Peridot rolled her eyes. Lapis elbowed her while grinning.

Connie walked through the blinds and window with almost no resistance, her insubstantial body flowing around the narrow obstacles. She and Steven mimed high fiving on the other side, though Steven overshot, his hand going through Connie's entirely.

They repeated this test with progressively narrower openings until Connie found the half-an-inch gap too small to pass through. But a single one-inch gap was enough for her to sort of ooze through, something she could see was cause for varying degrees of surprise, amusement, and discomfort in the mindscapes present.

Gort made a valiant effort to squeeze through the gap itself before getting tangled up in the blinds and hanging there impassively.

Connie jumped off a five foot platform and landed neatly. She jumped off a ten foot platform and stumbled slightly, but only because she wasn't used to dropping that far, not because the impact was any more jarring. The twenty foot jump saw her pivot too far forward and land in what was effectively a belly flop --Peridot and Steven's mindscapes lit up like constellations of worry-- but she was no worse for it.

With Steven signing for Connie's behalf, Lapis offered to test a drop of 'parachuting without a parachute' but this was vetoed by Peridot. Loudly, if Steven's flinch was anything to go by.

That Connie had learned most of this during her sneak out attempt two days ago was something neither she or Steven saw fit to mention.

What Connie had earlier called a maximum security aquarium was actually a sealable and reinforced tank with numerous pressure sensors built in. The top flipped open and Lapis guided ocean water in until it was overflowing, as much of the interior bubbles chased out as possible. Then the top was sealed. By 'flexing' the water inside, Lapis could raise the internal pressure as
Connie ghosted through the clear sides and stepped into the tank. Then she sat down and waited, whiling away the time studying the fascinating vistas before her.

There really was something intensely interesting in watching them, like a lava lamp crossed with a fractal crossed with a deeply intimate character study all in one. She could see why this had been, according to the gems, one of her mom's favorite pastimes.

After twenty-two minutes and thirty seconds --eight seconds longer than the world record for a human holding their breath-- Steven signed at her that she could stop. They'd found it took between thirty seconds and two minutes for her to become solid once more, which was why forty-five seconds later Connie found herself suddenly submerged in salt water, the sounds of the world (muted by the water and the tank) coming back in a rush. Her cheeks ballooned out as she abruptly found herself holding her breath.

It was then that she realized Gort was staring at her and tapping the glass. She gave the bot a cross look.

About sixty seconds later she got the sign from Steven and the world went quiet. Connie dropped to the ground, having drifted up slightly while bobbing there. She sucked in a deep lungful of air, only not really because there was neither air to inhale or lungs that could inhale it. Nor, for that matter, did she need to breathe like this: the burning in her lungs subsided rapidly regardless of whether she 'breathed' or not.

She stepped out of the tank and found herself dripping water that pooled in the opaque sand. Steven tried poking one of the puddles, his finger going through without disturbing them. Lapis apparently tried to levitate them with her hydokinesis and was unable to affect it. Gort took notes. When Connie returned solid a seventy seconds later, the salt water returned to normal with her.

Peridot might have been talking just then but Connie couldn't hear, her hearing aids having been removed before her dunk. And seeing as she was dripping from head to toe, Connie prioritized at least getting her face and hair toweled off over putting them back in.

Finally she nodded and Steven handed her the devices.

"-you returned to your substantive modality," said Peridot, "the pressure in the tank increased precisely as much as would happen by dropping an equivalent mass therein."

Steven paused while en route to getting Connie another dry towel. "Um... huh?"

Off a little ways Gort was splashing in one of the puddles, then pausing to note something on an (increasingly damp) clipboard.

"I mean," offered the technician, "Connie displaced the water when she became solid. And as she didn't restore with water in her lungs and nasal cavity, her power preserves the entirety of her interior. I suspect that is the reason why the water stored in the fabric of Connie's attire changed modality too; it was deemed part of her and therefore transformed."

Connie took the proffered towel and resumed drying.

"Alright, let a professional take over," said Lapis, cracking her knuckles. Before she could object, the water on Connie was whisked away and hurled into the ocean.

The girl made an undignified noise of surprise and then said, "Laaapis! Now I have super dry
skin." The gem’s hydrokinesis was an indiscriminate instrument.

Lapis had her smirk at the ready and a bottle of lotion at hand. "Guess you'll have to moisturize. I'm sure Pinkie can help get your back."

Suddenly Connie and Steven found themselves blushing. Then Peridot tractor beamed the contents of a gallon bottle of fresh water and dumped it over Connie, the girl shrieking in surprise.

"She can drip dry or return to the Beach House and change," fired back the green gem acerbically.

There was one test left Connie wanted to finish before she trudged back up to the house to put on dry clothes. She shot displeased looks at both Peridot and Lapis and went insubstantial.

Flexing the water, Lapis raised the pressure in the tank to several atmospheres-worth. Connie pushed her hand through the glass and into the water (no one wanted to risk her stepping into the tank entirely) and found the sensation no different than before. Even when the pressure was raised to the upper limits of the tank's tolerances, it had no effect on Connie, her light form seemingly agnostic to pressure.

Finally, Lapis forced the water to 'open,' leaving a bubble of vacuum in the middle. This she maneuvered over to the side of the glass, which Connie confirmed was no different from the high pressure.

Then, dripping and grumbling, she trudged up to the Beach House, becoming solid (and therefore damp) after she got a hundred feet away from the others.

She couldn't generate electricity while insubstantial. If she built up an internal charge first, went insubstantial, and released a yellow-white bolt and a shower of sparks, what she really released was a yellow-white flash and a shower of sparkles: all light, all without actual electrical charge.

She could summon her sword, her gemstone glowing, the hilt starting to emerge. But without hands that could grip hard light, the blade would retreat back into her stone or fizzle.

Touching foreheads with someone, like she'd done to purge negative energy from others or transfer injuries, went exactly as poorly as she'd expected.

At least her force fields still worked, though she couldn't personally do anything with them save use them to arrest a harmless fall. It's not like she could climb them while insubstantial.

Connie sat down and took a multiple-choice test, calling out the answers. She then took another test, this time while insubstantial, signing the answers to Steven who called them out on her behalf. She scored slightly worse on the second test but more tellingly, took nearly fifty percent longer to finish it.

"It's just so hard to pay attention to everything. It's like having a really distracting popup visible. A really distracting and... fascinating popup that you really want to click," answered Connie while giving Wolf noggin scratches.

In the background Jasper was busy hauling tires and ropes and chest-high walls. Gort helped, struggling before figuring out it could flip the tires on edge and roll them to the destination.

A little later Connie was running through the obstacle course they'd set up, with Gort following along the side, its omnipresent clipboard in hand as it went. She was panting at the end of it, Gort nearby, the scritch of its pen audible.
Connie ran through the obstacle course again, this time insubstantial. She actually made slightly better time... but mainly because she tripped through several of the obstacles. Her overall coordination was way down.

Jasper shook her head. "You'll be a much poorer fighter like that," she grumped.

Connie stared up at the Quartz from where she was seated, her expression skeptical. Steven, meanwhile, was rubbing her shoulders and giving her squirts from a water bottle like he'd seen a boxing coach do on TV once. "Okay," conceded the girl, "but I'm basically invincible like that. Even if someone threw a boulder at me, I wouldn't actually be in danger of getting hurt."

Jasper's eyes narrowed. Then she beckoned for Connie to stand a few feet away. "Stop me," she commanded, the last thing Connie heard before the world went silent.

Slowly and without apparent hurry, the Quartz walked forward. Connie summoned a force field. The gem stepped casually around it. Connie summoned another, then two more. These Jasper hopped over. Finally she summoned two, as large as she could, leaving only a narrow gap between them, one just wide enough for her gemstone to fit through. She fled through the double-wide barrier.

At a walking pace, Jasper stepped around the obstacle's left side.

Head swimming from six extant fields, a see-through Connie could only bat ineffectively at orange arms as Jasper walked inexorably forward. Hands closed around Connie's gemstone, lifting the girl a few inches off the ground. She'd seen Jasper pulverize concrete with those hands; shattering Connie's soft light gemstone would be trivial for the warrior.

She could have tried to panic Jasper, reached out into her mindscape and yanked, but that might not have done it given the warrior's discipline. And if there had been two opponents? More?

The fields winked out and, after being set back down, Connie returned to normal. "Point taken," said the girl. Point definitely taken. "I can see why Mom had a shieldbearer," she added, still a little shaken by the experience.

Steven walked over and pulled her into a protective hug, which Connie clung to with surprising intensity. She did not like feeling powerless.

Jasper nodded then, her expression softening, said, "Good thing you have a good one."

This earned a smile from Connie and Steven both.

A few seconds later Peridot cleared her throat and said, "There is one last test before we adjourn."

"Oh?" asked the girl.

Connie's lungs were burning and her vision was starting to narrow, a tunnel of black closing in from the edges. She'd sprinted, full bore, as fast as she could for as far as she could, and if her throat wasn't fully booked trying to suck in air she was pretty sure the contents of her stomach would be trying to escape.

Then she reached out with that indescribable sense of hers and the pounding in her ears went silent. The omnipresent ache was still there but fading away, as was her breathlessness.

Thirty-five seconds later she was material once more, lungs aching, limbs burning, though less
than before. Certainly less than if she'd spent the entire time solid.

She 'flickered' a few more times while Peridot took readings and Gort poked her now and again, jotting something down on its clipboard.

Holographic displays appeared around Peridot as data was analyzed. There was a noise of surprise followed by "I wonder..." from the technician, and then the number of displays redoubled.

Connie and Steven and Lapis all shared a look. Then all three shrugged, unable to follow.

Suddenly the holograms rose up, allowing Peridot a clear view of Connie. With a wordless, holographic command from the green gem, Gort scampered over and kicked Connie in the shin.

"Ow!" yelped the girl, more from surprise than actual pain.

She was bathed in the light of Peridot's scan.

"Fascinating," breathed the gem.

Meanwhile, Connie was glaring at the stoic robonoid who was looking impassively back up at her. Steven walked over to comfort her.

Gort apparently didn't approve because it then kicked Steven in the shin. Connie was about to punt the bot across the beach when she noticed that Peridot had issued the same holographic command as last time, just directed towards a new target.

Connie opened her mouth to speak when Peridot said, "Connie, please transfer the Steven's injury to yourself."

"Uh, alright," she agreed, a little lost... though she shot Gort another glare. Drawing her boyfriend close, she signed, "[Ready?]

"[Ready,]" he signed back, reaching up and wiggling his nose for emphasis.

She brought her forehead to his, her gemstone glowed, and a beat later both her ankles ached slightly.

"Mind sharing with the class?" drawled Lapis a few seconds later.

"Connie automatically converts injuries into negative energy," answered a figure buried behind a wall of holograms.

Jasper grunted as Lapis added, "Eh?"

"I hadn't known to look before but when Connie was insubstantial the readings were much clearer," answered the technician, the cloud of fields slowly thinning. "Connie has always had an above average recovery time and vanishingly few infections. I was certain it was a consequence of her hybrid nature, but could never discern the mechanism by which it operated."

"Wait, you mean her body turns owies into stuff like what the Nightmare Monster and all those little trickster monsters are made out of?" asked Steven, equal parts intrigued and alarmed.

"Yes!" piped Peridot. "Albeit, very slowly. A minute portion of the damaged tissue is restored, resulting in a small amount of negative energy. This is then drawn into her gemstone and harmlessly dissipated."
Connie blinked. "Is that why I can absorb negative energy and injuries from other people? Because they’re, like, two forms of the same thing?" Connie summoned a horizontal force field at chair-height so she could get off her slightly sore ankles. "I always wondered why I could do both."

"That does seem to be the case," answered the technician. "You are capable of magically assisted regeneration, albeit very slowly! Illnesses were too slow-acting to adversely affect you, hence their conspicuous absence from your more immunologically vulnerable years. It should also mean that slow but degenerative ailments --various forms of cancer, low-level radiation damage, and certain nerve and joint conditions-- should be of little, possibly even no risk to you!"

Connie hadn't seen Peridot this happy since the local hardware store had started stocking duct tape in bulk.

"And me getting less gaspy after turning insubstantial?" pressed the girl.

"I'm uncertain exactly. Perhaps correcting for inadequate oxidation is easier while you are made of light instead of layers of human tissue. Likewise for neutralizing lactic acid build up." Peridot shrugged and then threw her limb enhancers in the air, exuberant. "Regardless, this finding answers a great many questions of mine and puts to rest a number of worries of mine!" She pulled the girl into a tight hug and even spun the pair of them around, laughing.

Connie eventually separated, a little dizzy. She briefly wondered if her Colored Perception power could correct an inner ear disturbance before deciding against it. Then Lapis and Steven closed in, each wanting to get in on the hugs and excitement: the former excited because it meant high-fructose corn syrup was back on the menu, the latter comparing Connie to a number of cool superheroes who could claim a healing factor of their own.

As they began to pack up their belongings, Jasper popped Connie's warm and happy bubble, saying, "I can finally step up your endurance training."

Chapter End Notes

The in-chapter art was drawn by BurdenKing.

Boy, has that power testing chapter been long overdue. I'm glad the plot finally got to a place where it could happen. It bears mentioning that I normally keep the power testing chapters in the Omake Collection because I don't assume everyone finds the finer mechanics and limitations of fictional powers as interesting as me. However, this one has details that are/are going to be too plot- and story-relevant to leave outside the main fic. I hope you didn't find it too dry reading.

Edit: Bingo Update
If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

Connie Swap has an official Discord for the fans. [Come check it out](#).

As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the [Connie Swap Tumblr](#). Thanks for reading!
Bathed in the dim glow of aromatic lava flows, Connie was braiding Steven's hair. Daneel braided Connie's hair, the Three Laws adherent robonoid doing so with exaggerated care so it didn't tug on the human's scalp and induce harm. Steven had been using a detailing rag he'd borrowed from his dad's car wash to polish Daneel's exterior, but paused.

"Uh, Miss Peridot? Could you repeat that?" he asked.

The lava flows smelled like cut grass.

Peridot was pacing a ways distant, holographic displays following after her like a swarm of particularly informative gnats. "I said that analyzing the recording of the Corruption Event is proving highly frustrating. One might even say vexatious."

"Because you can't listen to it?" asked the boy, feeling the tugs on his hair slow as his girlfriend paid more attention to the exchange.

"Because no one can listen to it!" barked the irate technician. "If I decode the data into a format that is sufficiently abstracted as to be safely perceived I just get... noise! And my attempt at working with it more directly through a robonoid intermediary was an ignoble failure."

Steven felt the robonoid corner of their braid triangle flinch.

"What if I helped?" offered Connie. She shared a look with Steven and added, "Or Steven? I'm half human and half-Citrine, so I ought to be fine, and Steven's not a gem at all."

Steven poked his belly button through his shirt. "One hundred percent squishy human," he announced cheerily.

Peridot pulled a face. "I did consider that approach but, without intending to belittle either of you, the audio analysis involves skills neither of you possess. It might prove an improvement over my failed robonoid intermediary attempt, but only a marginal one. Plus, I'd need to assemble a suitably soundproofed chamber and- and- Yes, Steven?"

The green gem had trailed off because Steven had thrust his arm in the air and was waving it energetically, a student who really wanted to answer the question. Or was in desperate need of a hall pass.

"DAD AND MOM KNOW AUDIO STUFF!" shouted Steven, the words all but bursting out. "And we've got a really nice recording studio built into the house that does all of that and please let us help with super important destiny business!"

Peridot blinked, mouth ajar.

Daneel offered its maker a shrug while it carefully completed the braid, cross-referencing the tensile strength of keratin so that it literally didn't harm a hair on Connie's head.

Dad was bent over the mixing board, eyes bright. He'd hung a 'Back in 30 minutes' sign up at the car wash and hurried home, not realizing he had a rag like the kind Steven had been using to clean
Daneel sticking out of his back pocket. Lion was perched on the chair behind Dad, trying to swat at the rag. Steven was pretty sure they'd left more than half an hour ago but no one seemed worried about that so he didn't bring it up.

No, what people were worried about --and by 'people' he meant Mom-- was the whole 'studying a sound-virus' thing.

"And you're certain it's only harmful to gems?" pressed Mom, her arms crossed.

The sound room was kind of crowded with five people and one cat in there. There was a bigger space beyond, ringed with seats, music stands, and microphones for a band, but everything they'd be doing today would be happening in the sound room. Whole Lotta Love was playing distantly over the house speakers, heard only because the door to the studio was propped open. Having background music playing in a recording studio was a really silly idea so this was one of the few rooms not wired into the house-wide sound system.

Miss Peridot lifted a pair of heavy-duty, noise-cancelling headphones off her head, her hair poofing back into position as she did. "The equipment in your sound laboratory is most adequate," answered the gem, pleased. "It seems I have underestimated your species, failing to keep abreast of human advancement in the field." There was a moment of silence between the women (Led Zeppelin aside) then, "I'm sorry, what was your inquiry again?"

"I said, are you certain this is only a risk to gems?" Mom's expression was halfway between 'Turn your ears up, young man' and 'Be careful with those fireworks, sweetie.'

"This can no more affect an organic being than one of your diseases could affect my hard light physiology," asserted Peridot confidently. Then she quirked her head to the side and added, "Probably."

"Probably?!!"

Connie was sitting on a chair in the corner, a AA battery held between each thumb and forefinger. Frizzy hair was trying to escape her braid. When a timer on her phone went off she popped the batteries into the flashlight on her lap, popped the cover back in place, and clicked the switch, a circle of light dancing across the walls. "Done!" said Connie, gently tossing the flashlight over to Dad.

She signed to Steven, who squeezed past the others to hand his girlfriend back her color changy necklace. He bent down and kissed the top of her head, a tingly feeling of static and butterflies accompanying the touch.

Dad chuckled as he ducked beneath the soundboard to peer up at the wires and stuff. "Thanks Connie! You're way better than the dozen or so battery chargers I've bought over the years."

Lion hopped down from the chair and walked across Dad's tummy so he could bat at a cable hanging down. Dad ignored the cat, adding, "As far as I'm concerned, magic that can save me digging through the garage is the best magic there is."

This brought a smile to Connie's face which put one on Steven's.

Maybe half a minute later Dad said, "Ah, there's the problem." He reached up and fiddled with something, Lion helping him by swatting at it. Mom offered a hand to pull him up off the floor, Lion running off to go jump in Connie's lap and stare at her for not already petting him. Back at the controls, Dad lifted the headphones to his ears and, Steven knew from his own time helping Sour
Cream, played some sample audio to confirm everything was right. "Alright, Peridot. The rig's ready to check out some actual space tunes!"

"Hun?" asked Mom in an uncertain voice.

Dad blinked, looking between Mom and Peridot. "This is probably safe, right?"

"Definitely probably safe," agreed Peridot.

"Then let's do this," said Dad, clapping his hands together excitedly.

Mom heaved a sigh, her face halfway between worried and lovey-dovey as she looked at the back of Dad's head.

"I have bookended the audio track in question so you'll know for certain when the recording has begun and when it has concluded," said Miss Peridot, hastily getting her headphones back on. Then she walked out of the recording studio, shutting the door behind her, silencing Led Zeppelin in the process. She opened the door a crack and added loudly, "Good luck!"

The door slammed shut again.

Dad double clicked a file called CAUTION__CORRUPTION EVENT EXCERPT__CAUTION.wav and minimized the audio visualizer that tried to open with it. Steven strained to hear but Dad's headphones were really good and Steven didn't catch anything.

Dad stared into the distance, silent through the whole track and then for several seconds after.

"Hun?" Mom poked Dad's shoulder. "Honey?" her voice becoming a little more worried the second time.

Connie was holding her breath. Steven was holding Connie. Lion was holding his temper at being preempted by something as trivial as an ancient sound weapon from space.

Dad slid the headphones down around his neck and shrugged. "I'm fine. Sorry." He shrugged. "There was half a sentence of talking and then it was just a note, like a couple of angry string instruments harmonizing, or maybe singing ran through some heavy synth." He shrugged again. "I don't have glowing eyes or green deely boppers on my head do I?"

Connie started breathing again, her hand caressing Lion's fuzzy flank in time to avoid a displeased swat.

Mom hugged him and said in a relieved voice, "No. You're not a space man." She nuzzled his neck, then sang in a soft voice, "~My space man... you are so much fun~" It was the start of part of the duet in What Can I Do For You, one which always made Mom and Dad get all smoochie poo with each other.

"Hey, uh, Mom?" started Steven. It was cute that they were so in love but he'd felt Connie's shoulders tense up.

Mom's eyes went wide and his parents separated. "Sorry about that," she apologized. "Just relieved your father's okay."

"Parents. Yuck, right?" Dad chuckled. "Anyway, since I didn't grow a tail or anything, I think it's safe to pipe this in over the studio speakers." He looked at Connie for confirmation, the half-gem nodded back vigorously.
Dad toggled the audio output and turned the fat volume dial up a little. "Alright. Here's goes," he said, clicking the play button.

There was the faint hum of the speakers and then Miss Peridot's nasal voice coming through. She sounded a little nervous. "The Corruption Event audio is about to commence. Any and all gems should vacate the area or don their protective ear wear immediately. The audio begins in ten. Nine. Eight. Seven..."

At the end of the countdown was an audio artifact (something Dad had taught him to correct for in his own sound editing) followed by a calm woman's voice. For some reason it made Steven think of the strict principle from his old school, the one he'd gone to with Neimaat near Wilmingmore.

"-ntrol parameters. You will need them if you hope to-"

Then a wall of sound rolled out. At first Steven thought Dad had played one of Sour Cream's experimental tracks by mistake. It was like techno violins or voices through several layers of auto-tune and distortion. There was a wavering quality to it, as if it was hard for the singers to stay on key with each other. He could understand why Dad said it sounded kind of angry.

Steven turned to sign a question at Connie when he noticed her gemstone shining like a yellow stage light. "Connie!" shouted Steven, startling Mom, Dad, and Lion.

Connie blinked, her eyes not really focusing on Steven. "What?" she asked really loudly.

Mom hit the mute button, plunging the room into silence. Lion, unhappy with the choice of music and the lack of consistent pettings, hopped down and stalked imperiously toward the door out, pawing at it when he found it closed.

Connie continued to not really look at Steven so much as stare through him. She did that a lot when she was all see-through. He poked her shoulder just to make absolutely sure she was really solid.

She shook her head and fiddled with her hearing aids. Then she took them out entirely and shook her head again, using a finger to clean out one ear. After another second the glow of her gemstone dimmed.

"Sorry," she said loudly, unable to really hear herself without her ears in. "There was that voice, then I heard, like, a second of noise and then I got this loud ringing in my ears." She put one of her hearing aids back in and said, "Test. Test." Her voice returned to a normal talking volume. "Okay, I think I'm better now." She glanced down at her gemstone, which dimmed and then went dark. She poked it. "That's probably a good sign whatever that was is over."

Everyone stared at her for a beat. Then she reached up to cradle her head. "Ugh. Um, Misses Universe? Do you have any headache medicine?"

Connie's phone rang, the phone number was Miss Peridot's. Dad got up to let Peridot, who had retreated to the garage, know it was safe to come back in. Mom left to get Connie something for her headache.

Steven had dragged a chair over so he could sit beside Connie, who was frowning as she was scanned for, like, the thirtieth time by Miss Peridot. She had a mug of hot tea in her hand, Mom having hustled out to make hot drinks and snacks after things had settled down.

"And you're certain you feel no further-"
Connie thrust one arm in the air, frustrated, splashing a little tea on her jeans. "Yes! The ringing is gone and the headache is gone and I'm fine except that someone won't stop scanning me."

Peridot gave her a frowning mom look. "I apologize, dear, but if you had been affected then-Hmm," and she brought one of her ropy fingers up to her chin. "Perhaps I should attempt an echocardiogram to make sure there's no arrhythmia induced by-"

"Hey, Peridot," said Dad.

"Oh please, thank you!" muttered Connie under her breath as she took a sip from her drink.

Steven pulled her into a half hug.

Dad was sitting at the mixing board, headphones over his ears and busy doing stuff. A mug of tea was cooling nearby, mostly ignored. He waved Miss Peridot over.

"Yes Gregory?" asked the green gem.

He slipped the headphones down around his neck. "I think I've found something kind of interesting. See, there's actually three different sounds here. I took some samples when they got out of harmony with each other and then used that to apply some filters. It's not perfect but I've got a thirty-second clip of each one by themself." He grabbed a second pair of headphones and offered them to the gem.

Peridot started to reach and then faltered. She looked over at Connie like she was about to ask her something, but then she shook her head and stood a little taller. She took the headphones. "Just a five-second sample, if you would."

Dad nodded and got the audio ready. He clicked play and all eyes turned to Peridot.

The gem looked nervous. Five seconds later she looked curious. "Fascinating. I felt no adverse effects. I merely heard a sustained musical tone. You may play the full thirty-second clip, Greg."

Thirty seconds later she nodded absently. "The next?" She listened. "Hmm, and you said you isolated exactly three distinct sounds?"

"Yeah. Want to hear the last one?" He took a sip of his tea and then stared down at it as if wondering how it'd gotten cold. When Miss Peridot gave him a floating thumbs up, Dad clicked play.

Peridot's eyes went wide. Then her techno hands went to her mouth. Then she stumbled.

Mom, who had just walked around the corner, hooked an arm under Peridot's armpit, keeping her from falling over. "Whoa. Are you alright?"

"It's her," said the green gem softly, the headphones pulled half off by the drop.

"Who?" Connie had set her tea aside and hurried to her feet.

"My Diamond." Peridot righted herself, wide eyes locking on Connie's. "Yellow Diamond!"

Lapis sat in a chair snacking on cookies, looking a little amused and a little nervous. She'd tried to ask what was up when Miss Peridot had dragged her in, but Peridot had told everyone not to say anything, 'so as not to influence the results.'
That seemed to make Miss Lapis even more nervous, the cookies disappearing faster.

Dad put the headphones snuggly around her ears and played a test audio clip: some nature sounds and a few musical chords to make sure the headphones were working right. Lapis gave a thumbs up and a, "Go ahead, Papa-verse."

He played what Miss Peridot had renamed 'Track Yellow.' Lapis looked around the room. "Is this supposed to sound like something? Because it’s just a weird noise." Then he played the next clip and Miss Lapis hit the ceiling. Literally, wings popping out and her flying straight up, the headphones dropping down and dangling off the side of the soundboard by their cord. Lapis hung up there for a few seconds, arms and legs braced against the corner of the sound room ceiling, her water spread over her like a net to keep her in place.

"Blue Diamond?" asked Peridot.

Lapis only nodded, still clinging to the ceiling.

Peridot pumped Mom's hand, then Dad's. "This has been an exceptionally productive foray. I must commend you both for your expertise and equipment. And Steven is to be credited with the original idea as well."

Mom smiled back. "We're happy to help. I hope more of your adventures can be solved from the comfort and safety of our recording studio."

"That would be a pleasant turn of events, wouldn't it," agreed Peridot.

"Any time, Peridot," said Dad. "You've got those files, right?"

A holographic display appeared. "I do. Thank you all once more." Then Peridot turned to Connie. "Come along, dear. We should return home."

Connie pulled Steven into a final, tight hug then stepped clear of her boyfriend, following her green chaperone out. "Yes ma'am." As she stepped out of the room she turned and asked, "Still want to meet before Lutes and Loot tomorrow?"

Steven called back, "Yeah! Come and get me as soon as you and Jasper are free. Then we can all
walk over to Jeff's together!"

Connie and Miss Peridot left, Steven waving and calling enthusiastically after them. When he came back he saw that Dad had been snacking on one of the few cookies Miss Lapis hadn't eaten, the man staring off into the distance.

"Feeling inspired?" asked Mom.

Dad nodded. "If it's okay, I think I'm going to go try out a few chords up in the mellow room." He walked past, his eyes not really seeing what was in front of him. “Space diamonds,” he muttered as he went.

Steven was helping his mom tidy up when she looked at him and stepped over, pulling him into a squeezy hug. "You did good today." She kissed the top of his head. "How about we order a pizza for dinner?"

"Woo!" was Steven's answer, adding the knocking sign that meant 'yes'.

Though it took a few minutes on the phone for Steven to convince Kiki that this order was legit and not part of any magic-fueled ploy.
Other than the faint sounds of simmering lava, it was silent in the burning room. Connie gestured another yellow bubble down and peered into it. She squinted and then looked to Jasper for guidance, but the Quartz shook her head.

With a gesture the bubble floated back up, another yellow one passing it heading down. A gemstone of mottled brown (tinged yellow, of course) hovered within. Connie nodded, wrapping her arms around the bubble and clutching at it slightly.

Girl and warrior turned to depart, each in respectful silence. Neither spoke until they reached the warp pad.

"Why Biggs?" asked Jasper in a low voice.

The bubble hovered faithfully in front of Connie as she shrugged on her winter jacket. "I made a promise to Amethyst."

Jasper took this with stoic acceptance, three Quartzes vanishing in a pillar of light.

It was morning in Beach City but mid-afternoon at the Sanctuary, the streaming sunlight doing little to offset the magical cold descending over Connie. It was because of the place's supernatural calm that Connie didn't feel butterflies in her stomach, though a part of her recognized that she should be feeling anxious.

Connie, Jasper, and a bubbled Biggs descended the steps towards the lotus-topped structure at the center and the statue therein. Corrupted gems lounged and played around them, offered succor from their affliction, one Connie was hoping to study and, eventually, cure.

Like her mother had tried.

Like her mother had failed to do.

That fact really should have made her feel nervous, a corner of Connie dispassionately observed.

Standing before Citrine's larger-than-life statue, Jasper said, "Go ahead."

Connie gestured the bubble in front of her and struggled with it like someone trying to find an edge in the wrapping paper of a gift. Eventually she gave up, poking it with the saber she wore on her hip, a necessity in that she couldn't summon her sword in the sanctuary, unable to muster the righteous indignation needed.

Connie's gloved hand shot out to catch the mud-colored stone but the seat of Biggs' consciousness hovered upward in defiance of gravity, glowing brighter with each second. Realizing what was coming next, Connie jogged back a ways to give the corrupted Quartz room to reform.

There was a blur of white silhouettes, one of them humanoid, and then a shape like a cross between a bear and a dog emerged. Biggs' skin was a collage of browns and tans, like the striations you might see in Arizona's Painted Desert, which Connie had visited with Peridot a year ago during one of their geology lessons. A wild mane stretched the length of her form, ending in a white tail and cascading over either shoulder like a shawl. Three horns emerged from an eyeless face. Her rear
legs were canine but thick forearms ended in hands, though hands splayed forward to be walked on.

Biggs spun around anxiously, a growl in her throat before, slowly, the calm of this place stole over her. She 'looked' at Connie, then Jasper, then padded over to one of the colorful pillows at the statue's base and flopped down with a huff.

Connie reached out with that indescribable sense of hers and felt the sound and cold vanish. Filling her mind was a vista unlike any Connie had ever seen. Vast plateaus of color stretched between canyons of emotion and everything looked simultaneously right and wrong.

For starters, everything was skewed light green. Connie knew with the instinctual knowledge her CP power provided that the vast stretch of calm over there should have been the azure of a tropical ocean. Instead it was tinged green like it was choked with giant kelp. The seaweed comparison was made especially apt because there were thin lines of green crisscrossing the pattern though Connie had to zoom in to see them clearly.

Watching in absolute silence for a few seconds a rising sense of wrongness in Connie clarified: the pattern wasn’t behaving the way it should. The pattern could be considered a fractal, with certain basic rules interacting with the larger structure to define a person's emotional landscape. But the green-tinged calm of this area was directly affecting the viridescent confusion of this other area despite those two not touching. It was as though someone had taken the intricately arranged plumbing for an entire city and then forced random connections between random pipes, so that the hot water tank of one house was emptying directly into a sprinkler ten blocks away.

It was green-shaded chaos imposed on order. It was confusion and insanity imposed on a mind. If Connie hadn't been both insubstantial and inside her mother's sanctuary, she might have been nauseated by the color-coded violation of self she was witness to.

With a voiceless exclamation Connie dove in close, her mental representation of herself zooming in on one such tendril-choked area. Like adjusting the topography of someone's mindscape, Connie tried to push the corruption weeds (or C-weeds, a corner of her quipped) around but found that they stretched and sprang back like elastic bands. If she had some means of cutting them things might be different, but until she learned how to bring pruning shears into the mindscape, that wasn't an option.

Instead she focused on what her instinctive understanding told her should have been a slope of gradually deepening, reddish-brown self-confidence. It was choked with about four other emotions dumped arbitrarily into the region. With an effort of will, Connie adjusted the slope to be the coloration it should have been all along: a russet swath. The tendrils remained but the green tinge fled, scrubbed clean by her efforts.

One cubic foot down, a million more to go, observed a corner of her as she zoomed back to see just how tiny the pocket of uncorrupted emotion was in the vast sea of C-weed choked mindscape.

Then she saw even her little patch of clean vanish, tainted light green once more. Connie gave a voiceless yelp and zoomed in once more to see the corruption bleeding over through neighboring areas and the C-weed both. She cleaned the patch once more but found herself unable to keep it that way.

It was only because she was in the sanctuary that she didn't return to solid form scowling.

"Any luck?"

Jasper was standing beside the corrupted Quartz, petting Biggs' mane like she would Wolf's yellow
Connie shook her head and walked closer. Biggs started to recoil from the proximity but the supernatural calm and Jasper's presence helped settle the corruption back down. Connie shot her orange guardian a look, receiving a nod in return.

They'd discussed this in advance.

With the sense that she should have felt fearful hesitation, Connie leaned forward and touched her forehead to the spot between Biggs' three horns.

There was a rushing sensation, and a ringing so loud in Connie's ears that she couldn't even hear her own thoughts. A corner of her suspected it heard a few strains of music, tantalizing yet terrible, and there was an all-pervasive glow as though she was wearing the noonday sun as a lapel.

A large hand gripped Connie's shoulder and ripped her away from the corrupted Biggs. It took her a second to get her eyes to focus and when she did it was clear Jasper was saying something. What, she had no idea, though, the words impossible to hear over that louder-than-loud ringing.

"What?" Connie probably shouted.

Jasper's lips moved more. Connie had never gotten all that good at lip reading, not like Steven was, and it was hard to see anything with her gemstone glowing like a spotlight.

"Hang on! I'm going to go insubstantial to see if that helps with this!" Connie definitely shouted back.

The ringing suddenly stopped, Connie lacking ears capable of hearing it, but the glow at her chest flared from 'spotlight' to 'surface of the sun'. Connie fled into the nearest mindscape as much to escape the light as see if the forehead transfer had helped.

Wow! The corruption was gone, C-weed and green tinge both! Well, there was a medium-sized hold-out of green in one spot, bleeding out from a blasted area, but it was spreading so slowly that Connie could-

With a realization that rocked her, sanctuary calm or no, Connie realized she wasn't looking at Biggs' mindscape at all.

Connie zoomed out, hoping she had delved into some other corrupted gems' mindscape but realizing the futility: mindscores were as unique as fingerprints and there could be no mistaking Jasper's mindscape for any other.

A glance at Biggs' vista showed that a great swath of her 'scape had been purged of the sickly green of corruption but it was rapidly being tainted anew. Good to know but Connie had bigger problems right now.

The two minutes it took for her to return to normal were some of the longest of her life. Fortunately, the glow of her gemstone gradually dimmed to nothing by the end of it.

"Jasper! You're corrupted!"

The orange gem gave her a perplexed look, all while Biggs gazed up at the statue of Citrine with sudden interest, tail wagging slightly. "I know," said the warrior. "Your mother removed it after the war."
Her sleeve vanished in a sparkle of light, and Jasper reached down to scratch at the corruption-marked skin beneath. One of the greenish circles grew slightly, obscuring just a little more of one of Jasper's stripes.

Warrior and hybrid shared wide-eyed looks of surprise, unpanicked solely because of their locale.

"I'm going to purge you," said Connie, getting close. Jasper nodded and crouched down. Connie brought her forehead to Jasper's and if purging Biggs had been like trying to drink an ocean, purging Jasper was like finishing the milk at the bottom of her bowl of cereal.

Her gemstone glowed and her ears rang, but neither so intensely as before. Then the world went silent and colorful.

The green was gone! However, when Connie zoomed way in she saw that a blasted area was ruptured and a fine amount of green was oozing out. It was as though Citrine, unable to destroy the corruption, had contained it in walled off sections and something had cracked one of those open!

Connie manually cleaned the affected area. It became green-tinged seconds later. She tried to clean the blasted area itself but that not only didn’t help, it seemed to make the corrupted green ooze out faster. Connie gave a voiceless yelp, staring at something only she could see.

She had to fix the broken containment and Connie had no idea how! She didn't even have a clue how her mom had made them in the first place: all of her CP power’s changes were temporary and besides, none of them did anything like this!

Jasper! Come with me! We need to find-

Jasper stared at her uncomprehendingly and Connie realized she was still immaterial. She was denied even the catharsis of a facepalm when her insubstantial hand went through her insubstantial forehead.

Finally the calm of the sanctuary reasserted itself over her (maybe exposure to corruption threw her off balance) and Connie took the ghostly equivalent of a deep breath. Looking up at her mother's serene expression, Connie set down and waited. And thought.

Sound and cold returned. "Jasper, how long have your corruption marks been changing?"

The Quartz shook her head, still idly stroking Biggs' mane. "Don't know. Only just noticed them." She scratched her arm and then paused. "I’ve been itchy since the Ziggurat mission."

Connie's eyes narrowed. "The Ziggurat mission? Wasn't that where you guys got the Corruption audio in the first place?"

Jasper nodded. "Bismuth played it by accident when she found it. Knocked all of us out. Me and Lapis longest."

"And you two are..." words failed her and Connie gestured vaguely in the direction of Jasper's mottled arm.

"Marked by it, yes," confirmed the Quartz.

Connie stood up. "Okay, we need to-" She faltered, then looked up at her mom's larger-than-life form. She'd said in her journal that she’d stayed in the sanctuary to cure herself and then to treat Jasper and Lapis. There must be something about this place which stymied corruption's spread. Plus, it had been more than a week since the gems had gotten back from the Ziggurat mission so
whatever Jasper's affliction, it wasn't super fast-acting. "Nevermind. You stay here. I'm going to get help."

She saw Jasper nod, then turned and jogged for the distant warp pad. You just couldn't seem to get a proper, panicked sprint going under the sanctuary's aura.

Connie vanished in a flash of light.

Connie looked at the note left for her and was finally able to have her long-overdue panic.

*Laz and I are working on the orbital platforms DOOM CANNONS. We'll be back this evening. Be well, dear,* read the note which had clearly been edited by Lapis after Peridot had written it.

She checked the temple, porch, utility room, and sky arena just to be sure but no one else was around save for her electronic tattletails, Will and Robinson.

The whole time her thoughts were going in circles. The corruption audio had damaged the treatment her mom had done on Jasper thousands of years ago. Lapis could be afflicted as well; Connie hadn't noticed it during the CP testing two days ago but she hadn't noticed it in Jasper either since she didn't know what she was looking at at the time. Connie had no idea how to repeat that treatment which meant her options were sharply limited. She could go to her mom's archive and dig through the notes there for a clue, but who knew how long that would take! She might be able to keep Jasper in triage until a solution was found but even that was still unnerving to the point of mild panic. If it hadn't been for that dang corruption audio then-

Connie was pacing in circles up at the sky arena when she gasped out, "Mister Universe!" yet another epiphany rocketing through her. "I need to get to Steven's dad! Robinson can tattle on me if it has to because I don't care if-

There was a sound like a distant howl getting closer and then a swirling vortex appeared nearby, Wolf rocketed out. Correction, Dogbo, the fry shop's oversized mascot, rocketed out, hitting the flagstones so fast that he skidded a full six feet before stopping.

"Wolf! Good boy!"

The hound panted, half from the exertion of howl-portaling, half from satisfaction. Connie wasted no time, sprint over and leaping onto Wolf's back, some of his costume squishing awkwardly underneath. "Wolf! Take me to Steven's house!"

Dogbo sprung forward and Connie was treated to the uniquely terrifying sight of hurtling toward the edge of the sky arena at full Wolf-gallop. Then there was a howl, a portal appeared a few feet over the edge of the platform, Wolf leapt, Connie screamed, and the world turned into brilliantly lit kaleidoscopic tunnel.

Mister Universe, who had clearly been napping until just minutes ago, stared at Connie bewildered. "You want what again?"

"I need the opposite to the corruption audio. You know, like, play it backwards or invert the recording or- or-" She gestured vaguely, the girl racking her brain for something else that sounded plausible. "Reverse the polarity?"

A half-smile found its way to Mr. Universe's face. "I think that last one only works in *Star Trek.*" Then he shook his head and took a sip of coffee from a mug that read 'Why A.M. I awake this
"But if we're just throwing ideas at the wall and seeing what sticks, I can try a few things."

"Yes! That!" and Connie winced at just how loud her own voice sounded. She turned her hearing aids way down as she nearly bounced in place there in the Universe family's recording studio.

Steven's dad nodded. "Alright. I'll get started, but I'm going to need three things from you: the fuzzy blanket from my mellow room, a bag of chips, and some lapsang souchong tea."

Connie nodded so hard it rattled her teeth. She sprinted for the door, then sprinted back. "With honey?! For the tea, I mean?"

Mr. Universe looked up from the mixing board computer and eyed her. "Yeah, with honey," and Connie was already gone before he'd finished the sentence.

Several breathless minutes later --Connie had strategized and gotten the tea brewing first-- she hustled back in. "I got everything you asked for," she said, panting a little.

"Good," said Steven's dad with a smile. He gestured to a chair nearby. "Now go ahead, wrap yourself up in a fuzzy blanket, and have some chips and tea. Because this is going to take a little while and I think you need the break."

Connie opened her mouth to object but the gently delivered hammerblow of common sense found its mark and her mouth clacked shut. Setting everything gently aside, she said, decidedly calmer, "Alright. Let me go check on Wolf real quick and then I'll sit down. Thanks, Mr. Universe."

Mr. Universe smiled back. "No problem. Feel free to get him some lunch meat or something. Second drawer on the right in the fridge." Then he returned to his mixing board.

Connie didn't see the corruption behave differently in the mindscape and Jasper, when she was solid again and could hear Jasper, said it just sounded like noise.

Connie removed item number five from her playlist: 'Audio in reverse, forced from sharp to flat.'

The next file on Connie's phone was 'Track Purple,' Mr. Universe's idea of taking each of the tracks he'd isolated and inverting the sound waves 'like what fancy noise-cancelling headphones do.' The principle being that if Track Purple and Track Yellow were played over one another, you'd get silence, each rise in one track’s sound wave negated by a mirrored fall in the other's.

She took out her hearing aids and pocketed them, then fitted the earbuds to her ears and pressed play. This was to confirm that what was playing didn't make her gemstone flare up in danger; this whole situation had been started because of Corruption-related audio, after all.

Jasper was right: this did just sound like noise.

When her gemstone remained matte, Connie handed the earbuds to Jasper. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Connie reached out with that indescribable sense of hers and the world went silent. In the split-second before she focused wholly on Jasper's mindscape, Connie saw Jasper looking at her wide-eyed.

The corruption was... unchanged.

DANGIT!
Connie was just about to relinquish her hold on Jasper's 'scape when she decided she should go ahead and wipe out the blot of corruption already there. She did and, sure enough, it began to leak out once more, the orange section of 'scape adjacent to the blasted area getting tinged light blue.

Wait... blue?!

Connie zoomed in, confirming that what had once been light green was now light blue.

With some effort, Connie pulled her attention away from the mindscape and gestured at the Quartz until Jasper held the phone towards her, a large orange thumb hovering over track number seven: 'Track Orange.' Connie nodded vigorously.

She quickly cleaned the light blue blot and then waited, metaphorically holding her breath. A little later and the corruption oozing out was pure white.

Connie thrust spectral arms overhead in triumph.

But why white? Or light blue, for that matter. Then it clicked: light green was blue, yellow, and white combined. Track Purple had weakened or negated the yellow while Connie cleaned, and Track Orange had done the same for the blue so only white remained.

Clumsily but excitedly Connie pantomimed at Jasper until she played track number eight: 'Track Black.'

After the last of the corruption was expunged, Connie looked and could find no evidence of the rupture around the blasted area. She waited a full ten minutes and saw no sign of further re-corruption. Whether her mother had used something similar in her own triage efforts millennia ago or if Connie had lucked into something that served to patch the walls, she didn't know.

However the sense of profound relief washing over her was entirely authentic and owed nothing to the sanctuary's aura.

Connie emerged from being insubstantial and leapt at Jasper, hugging the gem tightly around the waist. She felt one thick arm complete the hug while the other hand stroked Connie's hair. "All better?" asked the Quartz.

"All better," muttered the girl against Jasper's midsection.

The hug continued for a time before a gravelly voice said, "Think it'll work on Biggs?"

Connie opened her eyes and stared forward, dumbfounded. I mean, started a corner of her mind, it is the obvious thing to do next.

"We need to try," said Connie in scarcely more than a whisper.

The unbubbled Quartz corruption was still lounging on a cushion nearby. Jasper approached and started to extend the earbuds but paused, eyes narrowing at the lack of visible ears.

"Let's see if the obvious works before we try anything else," said Connie, unplugging the earbuds and pocketing them. She dialed the volume way up on her phone then opened each of the three tracks in their own media players. A second later and all three played concurrently.

The phone fell from ghostly fingers and Connie saw no visible change in Biggs' mindscape. Of course it can't be that easy: one at a time it is.
Finally solid once more, Connie turned off the tracks and closed the other media players. Getting everything setup, she passed the phone to Jasper. "Start with Track Purple and don't move on to Track Orange until I give you the signal."

Jasper nodded, pressed play, and thrust the phone more or less in Biggs' face right at the same time Connie lost the ability to hear what was playing.

Connie cleaned a square of green-tinged ‘scape and… the corruption replacing it was light blue!

There was so much green, though...

Connie sat down on a cushion that was as yielding as concrete and got to work.

Somewhere in the middle of Track Orange Connie realized she was being jostled. Focusing on the world in front of her instead of its mindscales, she saw Lapis and a cross-armed Peridot standing nearby.

A power cable ran from the phone in Jasper's grip over to Peridot's primary limb enhancer. *Oh, right. I guess playing a sound on repeat would drain the batteries after a few...*

Connie blinked with translucent eyelids. *How long has it been?* With all the usual sensations removed and bodily needs suspended, it was easy to lose track of time while insubstantial. Although a kind of pervasive weariness was present that she didn't remember being there before.

Still there was more to do. Connie waved at the two additional gems then gestured to the large, earth-toned Biggs before shifting her focus back to a sight only she could see. She trusted Jasper to keep the others placated while she worked.

Was all the white gone? Connie zoomed out and looked. It was hard to tell and she made a mental note to start with Track Black next time. Maybe save track Purple for last since the yellow would probably stand out the most. Regardless, with the exception of the webwork of random C-weed connections crisscrossing Biggs' mindscape, the vista looked normal.

*Or what Connie assumed was normal. It's not like she'd seen Biggs' 'scape back before she'd been corrupted.*

It felt like Connie's brain was wrapped in Mr. Universe's fuzzy blanket. Maybe several. She didn't feel hot or cold, tired or sore while like this but somehow her *gem* ached. She'd never felt that before and it was as unsettling as the sanctuary's aura would allow it to be.

Tearing her gaze away from the fractal, Connie saw...

A faint glow coming in through the doorways into the inner sanctum and a corrupted Biggs sitting on her haunches and gesticulating. Peridot stood nearby, a holographic display rotating through the alphabet one letter at a time. Lapis was alternately looking at Biggs, eyes moist, and down at what looked like a sheet of printer paper, marker in hand. Jasper watched, one arm thrust out and still holding Connie's phone near the corrupted Quartz.

The insubstantial Connie stood up and staggered, drawing the others' attention. There was something familiar about Biggs' behavior but her leaden thoughts were having trouble clarifying what exactly. On her third attempt she managed to rise to her feet and shuffle over toward Lapis.

Wiping a damp cheek, Lapis smiled up at the girl and flipped the sheet of printer paper around. '—
WITH SNOWFLAKE WHEN IT HAPPENED. OBSIDIAN TRIED TO WARP BACK FOR INTEL BUT THE PADS WERE BEHAVING STRANGELY. TH,' the message having gotten no farther than that yet.

Glancing down Connie saw a stack of other pages, at least a dozen, all covered in similar writing. If Connie wasn't mistaken, the earliest one had shorter words and more misspellings.

Connie blinked, pointlessly given her see-through eyelids, and finally it clicked. When she'd first shapeshifted into a cat, Steven had taken video on his phone of some of her antics. Then Peridot had made every effort to capture every iota of footage of her shapeshifting power test back in August. Connie had watched some of that and Biggs was behaving similarly: a full intellect trying to communicate while trapped in an animal's body.

Something happened that caused all the gems to look towards Biggs, which drew Connie's attention. The bear-dog shaped gem was thrashing her head back and forth as if trying to clear it. At the speed of thought Connie cycled through the available vistas until she came to the one festooned with marks, every inch of Biggs' scape touched by Connie's power at least three times.

A dark green was spreading out rapidly, a strand of C-weed at the center of each new blot.

With a gem-deep weariness Connie gestured for Jasper, who jabbed at the phone, the signal to turn off the final track: Track Black.

White spread out from the C-weed, a secondary ring of corruption fanning out and changing the center of the expanding dark green circles light green.

Until Connie found a way to get rid of the C-weed, her corruption cleansing efforts were temporary at best and seemed to do nothing for the gem's corrupted form.

Like the end of Flowers for Algernon fast forwarded, Biggs' made one last, clumsy attempt to communicate before stopping entirely, the mottled Quartz eventually padding off distractedly to wander the sanctuary.

Connie laid down on a concrete pillow, staring blankly up at the lightening sky visible through the lotus-shaped ceiling overhead. When she became solid, sound returned and she sank into the cushion. Also, for some reason, the palms of her gloves felt scratchier.

She couldn't cry, not in the sanctuary, but a corner of her knew the frustration would roar to the fore as soon as she warped home.

"Connie? Are you well, dear?" asked a gentle voice.

Connie shrugged. She somehow felt absolutely fine and absolutely drained at the same time. "H-" and she croaked, licking her lips for moisture and swallowing. "How long was I working?" Jasper and she had arrived in what was locally afternoon so maybe it was stretching on toward evening outside.

"Roughly thirteen hours," said the gentle voice that Connie couldn't bother to raise her head to see.

THIRTEEN- A long, weary sigh escaped the girl. Dawn was breaking over the sanctuary; she'd been there all night. All night and all for naught.

"Let's get you home, girlie," said another voice and a blue face entered Connie's field of view. She didn't resist as slim but deceptively strong arms lifted her up. "You hungry? Thirsty? I know glow-Connie is made out of magic and moonbeams, so maybe you just want a light snack."
Connie groaned because bad puns were still bad puns, even in the sanctuary.

"I'm fine, just..." Connie sighed as she continued to stare at nothing in particular while she was carried across the sanctuary. "I'm just done."

"You did good, squirt," said a gravelly voice. "Thanks."

That managed to reach Connie, the girl raising her head enough to give Jasper a wan smile. "I'm so glad you're better. And- Oh, Lapis, I need to-" She let herself droop back down as Lapis shushed her.

"I know. OJ filled me in," said the blue gem. "You can scan me for bad mojo later. If nothing else, all of my unscratched itches lately have been metaphorical. Hopefully I didn't get whammied like Jassafras."

"To Jasper's point," said Peridot, the clank of her gravity connectors distinctive as she walked. "You have done very well this day. That progress with the Biggs Quartz, temporary and partial though it may have been, was more than I ever witnessed during your mother's attempts of the same. After so many centuries of effort..." and the gem trailed off.

"Almost didn't think there was a cure," finished Jasper.

That... that helped. A little, though that peculiar gem-fatigue, centralized and yet simultaneously pervasive, muted her reaction. Connnied managed a wan smile.

Then there was a chime and the warp and then the cold, calming grip of the sanctuary fell away. It was night back home and the long-delayed frustration politely but insistently entered the picture and Connie's phone exploded with missed messages and calls --no doubt from Steven after hearing of his dad's strange encounter-- and Connie couldn't deal with any of that.

Lapis tucked her gently into bed and pat her back while Connie sobbed and vented into her pillow, not exactly tired of body but definitely tired of soul. And later when she felt something digging into her hips, when she realized it was the hearing aids that had been in her pocket for most of the day, when obviously, audibly, something had happened...

Connie rolled over and set the hearing aids on her nightstand. She could hear the noises of the Beach House around her but that was just another thing tomorrow-Connie could deal with.

Today had been something, a success or failure or something in between, and right then she was too tired to worry about it.
"Your hearing is restored?!

Connie's wince at Peridot's exclamation was already proof of her claim. "Yes ma'am. It happened sometime yesterday at the sanctuary." She fidgeted, still in her pajamas. "I'm not exactly sure when."

The glow of Peridot's scanner washed over Connie, the girl automatically following through the steps of an examination, arms raised, palms out and so on. She could clearly hear the 'ding' of a scan returning no negative results.

Jasper was watching from the couch, The Tale of the Hero and the Companion open in her lap. Lapis, meanwhile, was leaning against the window of her window seat, a manga ignored in her lap and a bag of Pocky open beside her. She was using Wolf as a furry foot rest, the hound seemingly okay with the arrangement, especially since the occasional Pocky stick got tossed down for him to snatch up.

The rainbow was visible through the window Lapis was propping herself up against.

"I- But- Yes, everything about your auditory system is nominal." Peridot zoomed in and panned across a holographic display of Connie's body. "In fact, all of your systems are nominal. Even the consequence of you failing to floss between molars thoroughly enough over the last week has been ameliorated."

It was Connie's turn to look bewildered, though Lapis vocalized it. "Wait, so Con-con got a tune-up to her everything? Talk about your full body coverage!"

Peridot shook her head. "Not improved, merely returned to her healthy baseline. Like a gem's hard light form after reforming. Still, in an organic being..." She trailed off, then looked at Connie. "Have you noticed any other side effects or subjective differences?"

"Steven is so going to flip out that his girlfriend is even more superhero than he thought," said a pleased corner of Connie's thoughts. This was followed by another, more thoughtful corner going, "Actually, how is he going to feel about me not being deaf anymore? He had a lot of feelings of identity wrapped up in him being that way and then when I transferred it to myself that was kind of complicated for him and now this? How do I feel about it?"

A third corner quietly added, "I'm still deaf while I'm insubstantial, so I shouldn't get ahead of
myself.

But while that inner tumult was going on, what Connie's mouth said was, "I've noticed my hands feel more, um, sensitive for some reason. Like, my gloves felt scratchier after..." The thought of Biggs regressing to her animalistic state flickered through Connie's mind and she slumped a little. "...After things," she finished.

Jasper (carefully) set the book aside, stood up, and then strode over. She took Connie's outstretched palm in her own, a large orange finger prodding it. "No calluses," she declared a couple seconds later.

"What?!" cried Connie, feeling the inside of her palm herself. And now that she knew to look for it, yeah, her hands were completely smooth. "Ugh! I had to work for months to build up those calluses! And they're just going to go away everytime I spend too long using my CP power?"

Peridot pondered this. "I suspected before that your light-based state was somehow easier for your native regenerative power to restore. This leads strong support to that theory. I must also speculate that the addition of the sanctuary further heightens the effect: your regeneration operates via conversion of harmed tissue to negative energy and the sanctuary specializes in the removal of precisely that, after all."

Something occurred to Connie and she had to bull past her caregivers to reach the bathroom. A single glance in the mirror confirmed- "My cheek scar is gone too!"

There was a moment of quiet as though three gems were exchanging confused looks and then Connie heard Lapis' voice from the living room call out, "Why do you sound so broken up about that, girlie?"

Connie rounded the bathroom, approaching the others. "Because scars are kind of cool," she said in what was a very heroic tone of voice and in no way childish or plaintive.

Jasper gave a curt nod, earning a swat of rebuke from Peridot.

The rest of the morning was the usual mix of light-hearted and tense, with sharp turns between the two extremes as the topic of conversation veered between the Lutes and Loot scheduled at Jeff's later that day to the efforts with Biggs yesterday, from Peridot's joyous declaration that 'Connie might be able to recover from any non-fatal injury' to her sudden, panicked worry that the 'healthy baseline' the power was restoring her to was arbitrary or flawed in some way.

It was therefore with some relief when Jasper gathered up their things and bullied Connie out the door so the two of them could meet up with Steven and get to Jeff's on time.

Connie still wasn't sure about... a lot of things. Most things, really, but after making sure she had her bag of dice she was content to process all that in the background for now.

Everyone was getting situated, Connie helping Steven sift through his old character sheets trying to find the most up-to-date version of Roland Peggio, when Peedee cleared his throat.

"Do you wanna tell them or should I?" asked the teen from behind his GM screen.

Jeff shook his head. "No, go ahead, but let me do the end."

The blonde Fryman shrugged. "Okay." Turning to Jasper, he said in the slightly more theatrical tone of voice that meant he was speaking as Peedee the game master instead of Peedee the teen,
"Questing long and hard, Carella, Roland, and Todd-

"And Captain," interjected Jeff, referencing his character's falcon familiar.

Peedee rolled his eyes. "And Captain have found all possible missing shards of the petrified Samwise Éowyn following her heroic sacrifice to defeat the Goddess of Thorns. However, given the chaotic battlefield --because, seriously, you guys triggered that giant ceiling collapse trap, plus all the brambles, and that's before you get into having a Divination-immune goddess smeared across half of the Samwise gravel out there-- the statue of Samwise remains only three-fourths complete."

"Can I?" asked Jeff.

"I was getting there but fine," said Peedee with no real malice in his voice. He did stick out his tongue, though.

Jeff made the Space Balls salute back and then said, "Samwise is still a little busted up so I say we just find another statue that fits and use those pieces to fill in the gaps."

Steven cocked his head to the side. "Like, any statue? Because Roland could put a few skill points in sculpture and make a Samwise statue to use." He turned to Jasper. "Would you be okay with that?"

Connie shook her head. "I don't think that'd work. If we de-petrify Samwise with stone that's just... stone, do we know that that'd turn back into the proper tissue? We can't find all of one of her lungs, right?" and she looked to the GM who checked his notes and nodded in return. "Yeah, I don't want Samwise to come back one hit point away from dying and have muscle where a lung should be."

Steven furrowed his brow as he paged through the rule book. "Well, that's not really said in the rules so it'd be up to Peedee. Are you going to make it work like that?"

All eyes turned to the blonde GM who straightened some papers behind his screen. "Yeah, actually. I mean, aside from Samwise derailing my campaign when she turned my big bad evil gal into jelly-"

Jeff reached out and high fived Jasper, a smile creeping up the Quartz' face.

"-we also explicitly made this a no-back-from-the-dead campaign. I agree that technically petrifying and shattering one hit point away from dying isn't one hundred percent dead, but in the spirit of the setting, you're questing to bring your fallen comrade back," finished the GM.

"Like Morpheus and Trinity!" exclaimed Steven. "We can go to the underworld and I can play my lute and guide Samwise back and she'll know kung fu and be able to fly and- and-" Steven noticed everyone was staring at him puzzled.

"Kung fu?" asked Jeff.

"I think Steven was mixing up the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice with, um, something else," said Connie.


Everyone stared back at him.

"You know, Keanu Reeves? Black trench coats?" pressed the blonde.
"Mom didn't actually let me watch that one," confessed Steven. "I just saw some TubeTube videos talking about it."

Connie shook her head. "I asked once and Peridot made me study *Plato's Cave* instead."

Jasper shrugged. Jeff pointed to her, adding, "What she said."

"Anyway, you need another way to fix Samwise," said Peedee, bringing the conversation back to the subject at hand. "And she won't know kung fu... unless she starts taking levels in monk, I mean."

"And that's where the rest of my idea comes in," said Jeff, looking pleased. "We've fought, like, four medusas in past quests already and Peedee is always talking about the crumbly statues of heroes and victims around their lairs. So we go and find some people who are about Samwise's size... but, you know, missing their head or something. We don’t want to gank someone else’s save, but if they're obviously a goner then it’s okay."

Connie considered this. "It's like an organ donation just more..." and she trailed off.

"Magical?" offered Steven.

Peedee interjected. "Let's go with that. So, Jasper, are you okay with this?"

The Quartz looked at the others around the table, then crouched low to peer at her mini. Then, with solemnity, she rose and nodded once. "Samwise's quest continues so long as she is able to fight."

There was a cheer from around the table, even Peedee cracking a smile at the group's enthusiasm. Jeff's smirk was audible "Hey, and if we find some statue with really beefy arms no one's using, do you think I could-"

"Nooo," drawled the GM, clearly used to this kind of thing.

"Oh, it's not for Todd," said Jeff with relish. "I was thinking Captain could use them so he could deliver a proper Falcon pu-"

The group was saved from the long walk to a Smash Bros. joke by the sound of Jeff's mom coming home.

Jeff sprang to his feet. "Woo!" and hurried out the door. Calling down the hallway he shouted, "I love you snacks! Oh, you too, mom."

Steven chuckled and followed after, with Jasper only a step behind, the two there to help carry in the groceries from Jeff's mom’s car.

Connie was about to join them when she received meaningful look from Peedee and hung back instead, drifting back to her spot to fidget with the mini for her half-elven ranger.

The two of them talked quietly about the fight she'd had with Steven, the one following Asmi being unable to summon their sword.

"You know what would help?" asked Connie cautiously.

The door to the game room swung open and Jeff's mom came in, bags of snacks in her arms. "Rations to help you brave adventurers through your journey," she announced chipperly, depositing the spoils on the table.
Somewhere down the hall Jeff groaned out an embarrassed, "Moooom."

"Not so much 'what' as 'who,'" answered the blonde GM, offering a grateful nod to Jeff’s mom and already reaching for a bag of 'Maximum BBQ' Chaaaps.

--- October 5th---

One month ago, Connie and Steven started dating. You could tell because Lapis had declared this would be the last day of rainbows but that she was ending with a bang.

And so it was that eight rainbows, each leapfrogging the next so that they encircled the entire town, hung the in sky. Admittedly whichever one was directly facing the sun was pretty faded but a few hours later you’d be able to tell it was there.

That was fascinating but not, as far as Connie was concerned, important. No, what was important was that Connie knew two things: that Steven and she were going on a date and that Lapis (their chaperone for the evening) had been meeting with Steven so the two of them could plan things.

Connie knew nothing else, including where they were going or what they were doing. And as she was being led by a Lapis who was literally skipping as they approached her dad's apartment, Connie couldn’t help but feel a little afraid.

Priyanka was the one to answer the door. She smiled at Connie as she ushered her in. "I got your text messages. Fortunately you caught me in time and I brought everything we used before your last date."

"Wait, text messages?" said the girl, her voice crawling up in pitch.

There was a snicker from the blue gem behind her before Lapis said, "I'll be back in half an hour with the princess outfit."

"The what?!" cried Connie but Lapis was already winging away, chortling.

"Should I not have..." started Priyanka, looking between the girl and the empty entryway where the blue gem had been standing.

Connie shook her head in defeat. "No. Let's just go with it." She sat down at the dinner table where the beauty supplies were spread out. In a softer voice she added, "I thought you did a really good job last time."

Priyanka closed the door and had the good graces not to look too pleased at the compliment.

Connie stood at the door in a full length princess outfit complete with tiara and prop jewelry like something from a Tudor-era movie or a really elaborate Renfest. The dominant color was yellow, with white and green for highlights, though she'd been allowed to stay in her sneakers which was a comfort despite the anachronism.

Connie stood there, hair in an elaborate bun, makeup applied in that really pretty way that made it look like there wasn't makeup, and she could only blink and stammer.

Before her was Sir Stefan who had dropped to one knee while dressed head-to-toe in silver armor. He did this so he could properly greet the fair Lady Connaline. A distant corner of Connie's mind recognized the outfit as the armor Bismuth had gifted him on his birthday, but the rest of her could
only stand there and gawk, the girl going a little cross-eyed at the sight of her boyfriend as a literal knight in shining armor.

Below Wolf was waiting, wearing a saddle and colorful livery. Lapis was hovering not far off in a madrigal outfit of her own, blue with blue highlights, and barefoot of course.

Connie tried to remember how words worked but was having the darnedest time.

The crowd roared as the yellow knight unseated the blue knight, his lance splintering from the impact. A spotlight and cameraman panned across the Medieval Times audience, showing their reactions on a big screen and Connie thought she and Steven were showing up an awful lot in those sweeps.

Hopefully it was because of how elaborately they were costumed. Because while Connie didn’t earnestly believe that Steven would bribe a camera operator in advance of their date, or that Lapis would threaten him with a tsunami, she didn’t entirely disbelieve it either.

Speaking of Lapis, the gem was seated a few rows up, 'So as not to mess up the funky flow,' and doing her best to drink the period-themed restaurant out of Pepsi.

Connie glanced over at Steven and had to spend a moment admiring just how awesome he looked in armor. Then he glanced her way and the two of them smiled and blushed and Connie felt the spotlight pan across them as they leaned in for a brief kiss. She should have cared but at the moment she really didn’t, the kiss transforming into a shared giggle because this was a pretty spectacular date.

A few rows up she heard Lapis shout and whistle and Connie chose to believe it was at the jousting below instead of anything showing up on the big screen.

DJ SC was spinning tracks in San Francisco and they had tickets. But the show wouldn't start for a while longer and so it was that Connie, Steven, and Lapis were sitting on one of the arches to the Golden Gate Bridge, watching the sunset over the bay and sharing desserts from a place Steven's dad had discovered during his touring days.

They were really good desserts. And it was a really spectacular view.

Unfortunately, San Francisco wasn't Beach City, where gem stuff was taken in stride.

"Hey Lapis," said Steven, a quaver of nervousness entering his voice. "I'm pretty sure that's a police car down there. Oh, yeah, they just turned on their lights."

Lapis chewed and swallowed, eyes never leaving the bay. "Don't sweat it, Pinkie. I'll have us out of here before they send the copper chopper after us."

Connie leaned her head on Steven's pauldron'd shoulder, nuzzling him a little as she drank in the moment.

Below a second police car arrived, the officers talking and pointing and shaking their heads.

DJ SC was spinning tracks and they had tickets. This time there was no avocado-based alcohol being served so Connie and Steven could enter without having to fuse first. Not only that, but the theme was overtly medieval, Legend of Zelda vying with Ghosts 'N Goblins and other genre-
appropriate games for chiptune remixes.

At that Connie had to ask, had to make sure they hadn’t set this up in advance, hadn’t bribed Sour Cream to have a theme to match their date. Fortunately Steven assured her that he’d looked up the concert that would be on their one month-iversary first, seen the theme Sour Cream already had planned, and then he and Lapis had tried to build a date around that.

After the opening band --a bearded DJ by the name of Tom Bomb-ba-Drill, who had a pretty catchy Lord of the Rings/Megaman remix that Connie made a mental note to download later-- Sour Cream came out with none other than Buck and Jenny in tow. Sour Cream's baggy pants were scalemail in keeping with the theme, Jenny had on a bodice and a garland, and Buck appeared to be wearing pointy ears.

"I had no idea they were gonna be here!" exclaimed Steven as Connie shouted, "Oh! Is that where Jenny's been?"

She'd run into Kiki a few times since the sneak out attempt/pizza delivery and the twin had been giving her weird looks each time.

"Guys, gals, and fellow gamers," said Sour Cream's amplified voice as the crowd roared. "I want to introduce the two other parts of my Triforce, who came all the way out from the east coast to be here tonight."

The Cool Kids hugged and waved. Jenny ending on a saucy wink and if Buck did the same, it was impossible to tell behind the shades.

"I also want to introduce the guy who helped make this tour possible. Music Dad, come on out!" Marty jogged onto the stage and, despite the theme, seemed to be wearing less gold than usual.

The crown was pretty ostentatious though.

He hugged Sour Cream, then patted Buck and Jenny on the back before saying over the speakers, "I've been collecting royalties for years before this guy but it wasn't until I toured with my son that I felt like a king!" and the promoter clapped a hand on the DJ’s shoulder, beaming proudly.

In the rare occasions Connie had met Marty, he'd exuded an almost palpable aura of sleaze and here it seemed... less. A glance from Steven and she knew he was thinking the same thing.

"Any nines and above or anyone spending more than five hundred at the merch booth, come see me for a backstage pass," finished the man before retreating off stage.

Connie and Steven shared another look, this one less surprised. "[Still, it's an improvement,]" signed Steven and Connie had to agree.

"And to Mom, Little Bro, and Fish Dad back home, we love you guys," shouted Sour Cream. Then a massive turntable-slash-soundboard was lowered from the ceiling and the concert started in earnest, Buck and Jenny clearing the stage to let the DJ do his thing.

Lapis mostly hung out in the rafters, claiming 'it wasn't her scene minus Green' while Connie and Steven danced below.

"Connie? Steven?! Holy cow, it is you guys!" said Jenny near the end of the first set.

Buck nodded, offering them each a fist bump. He winced a little and shook his fist after bonking
against Steven's gauntlet.

"When did you guys get here?" asked Jenny, her bodice replaced with a shirt that showed a knight in armor and had the words 'Old School Heavy Metal' printed across the back. She’d kept the garland though.

"Oh. Wolf portaled us here a couple hours ago," shouted Connie so she could be heard over the noise. A part of her was wishing just then that she could turn her hearing aids down. She knew Steven usually carried earplugs precisely in case it got to be too much for him, and she considered asking him for a pair.

Buck and Jenny shared a surprised look, the latter finally saying, "Now that just isn't fair. We drove here in the Pizzamobile. Took days."

"Distance is an illusion," intoned Buck. "An illusion worth paying the airfare to cross."

"You two look absolutely adorbs," cooed Jenny, looking between the pair. "Well when you guys do your completely awesome warp home, tell Kiki I said thanks for covering for me!" Then she rounded on Buck and said, "That reminds me, let's hit up the merch booth. I promised Gunga I'd get her some swag. You would not believe her concert poster collection," and the two soon vanished into the crowd.

--- October 11th---

Connie (in her winter weather clothes) and Jasper stepped off the warp pad surrounded by a swarm of bubbles. Then Jasper warped away and came back with a cloud of even more.

Twice.

Then there was one last trip for the Quartz. Jasper returning with a large, sturdy cage held awkwardly but firmly in arms thrust out like the blades of a forklift. It was in fact the same cage that'd held the orange gem during the Colored Perception power testing of weeks past. Bismuth had repaired it but only after extracting a promise not to do anything like that again... without first getting her so she could watch.

Just as the pair were ushering their bubbled swarm toward the central lotus-topped structure of the sanctuary, there was another warp and there stood Garnet.

A hovering cluster of maroon bubbles bobbed beside the fusion, looking like a giant, floating bunch of grapes.

Jasper, peering through the bars of the cage she was hauling, gave Garnet a **look**. Then she had a briefly thoughtful expression and swiveled on Connie, eyes narrowing.

In answer to the question transmitted via Quartz-glare-telepathy Connie gave an impish grin and said, "If she didn't show up, I was planning on warping to the fountain grounds. Which would have gotten me in trouble, so it's a good thing Garnet saw it in the future and met me here instead."

Garnet smiled and offered Connie an approving thumbs up. Then she turned to Jasper. "I'm free to come here. And I can help. Plus," and she gestured at the bubbles of her own, "I have some I want to check as well."

Jasper made a growl but it was just for show, there literally being no real anger behind it. Not here.
Below a trio of corrupted Rubies scampered past while a Jade appeared to be juggling a trio of leaves with finely controlled wind currents. The large, mottled brown bulk of Biggs was visible walking sedately in the distance.

Jasper, Garnet, and Connie stood out in the sunlight, the mural of the Schism at their back, Garnet keeping the more excitable sanctuary denizens back from the cloud of bubbles.

Connie gestured the first bubble down, placed it in the cage, and popped it, a green gem embedded in a deep blue pillow landing in small, brown hands reaching through the bars. It had been the animating force behind the ice castle once, captured and bubbled on one of Connie's earliest missions as a Crystal Gem.

Garnet looked at Connie and shook her head.

Connie frowned but passed it carefully to Jasper, who used strong hands to carefully pry the gem free of the object it was embedded in. All three waited for it to reform within the cage to make sure it was actually corrupted.

Garnet's prediction was right, the icy blue gem-beast to emerge left no doubt. As violence in this place was impossible, Jasper lifted the cage and carried it to the warp pad, Connie only a step behind, the pair vanishing and then returning soon after. The cage was empty and the gem was within a yellow bubble that also contained the pillow: a gem in a yellow bubble with its old container was their way to know it had been well and truly checked.

Three dozen bubbles later and even Jasper was willing to take Garnet at her word, but Connie was adamant that they check each one. Future vision wasn't infallible, after all.

Connie had let one gem remain trapped longer than she had to be. And the girl had promised herself that she wouldn't let that happen to a second.

And even at the end of a long day, after every checked gem turned out to be corrupted, Connie was satisfied. There was a lightness to her that hadn't been there before, an old weight removed.

--- October 24th---

Lapis and Peridot were off with Tik-Tok. Jasper had been patrolling almost nonstop, though that was understandable considering recent events. Bismuth had returned to her forge. And after several weeks, Connie was really growing to resent her grounding. True, she was still attending therapy, still trying to figure out how to be in a better headspace when summoning her sword. But Asmi had way more to offer than sword fighting, way more to offer than fighting at all. It galled Connie.

But mainly she just wanted to go have fun with Steven.

Connie sat on her bed and scowled at the window she'd escaped through last time. There wasn't a mail carrier around to let her dive out and she was certain she couldn't get Kiki's assistance a second time. Though the fact that Kiki had been covering for her sister for a month helped supply an answer for the sheer amount of frustration Connie had seen.

Okay Maheswaran, she thought to herself. Colored Perception is out but I've got an entire gem's-worth of powers. What are my options?

She pondered this for a while and hit a metaphorical brick wall.

She changed approaches. Right. I'll get back to that. Say I do get out. I was nearly caught coming
back and it was only because of Bismuth being really cool that I had an alibi. I can't rely on her again, especially since she just goes straight back to her forge these days. So, when Peridot asks where I've been, I'll tell her...

Connie swiveled around and let her gaze wander across the Beach House to see if anything sparked her inspiration. Her eyes alighted on the temple door. Specifically the yellow stone in the top of the symbol set in the center of the door.

Every gem had a room in the temple: Lapis, Peridot, Jasper, and Citrine. Plus, according to Peridot, there were some spaces that existed regardless, like the burning room which housed the crystalline power plant for the whole structure.

And Mom's room was locked until I unlocked it in May.

Connie's gemstone lit up and the temple opened on a yellow room. It lit up again and the door closed. With an act of will it lit up a third time and nothing visible happened. Somehow, because powers were weird like that, Connie knew the door to her mom's old room was locked.

'Want to think about some things in private. In Mom's room. Will come out in time for dinner. Please do not disturb. Love, Connie.'

The note went on the kitchen counter.

Alibi accomplished, thought the girl with a smile. So long as she could sneak back in, her 'absence' was handily explained.

Looking around the house once more, she stopped on a squeaky chew toy Wolf had left lying around. Connie's eyes went a little distant as inspiration struck a second time.

Robinson surveyed the area while in wireless communication with its counterpart, Will. It stood atop a pyramid-like structure of packages, mail, and beverage cylinders that had slowly grown with two primary design elements at the fore: stability and height.

Height so that Robinson could better enact the Maker's will and prevent the designated target from escaping. Stability so Robinson could prevent an unhandled gravity exception error like had transpired with Will previously. The emotive-feedback signal of amusement had been frequent in Robinson's broadcasts since the incident in question.

The same was not true of Will's broadcasts, a fact correlated with yet more amusement outputs from Robinson.

Will, correctly, claimed that its elevation was higher than Robinson's, the ‘laundry room’ visible from the porch if Robinson trained its optic sensors upward thirty degrees from its position.

Robinson responded back, as it carefully nudged a red artifact designated 'plastic cup' into position for optimal structural integrity, that its elevation relative to the designated area it was tasked by the Maker to survey was higher. This was also true. And superior.

The doorway opened and Robinson focused all available sensors to monitoring the situation. A canine designated 'beagle' nosed its way out the door and stared at Robinson. The yellow gemstone at its chest was a statistical outlier but optical and sonar readings confirmed the body was a less than point-oh-oh-five percent match for the designated target.

This was below the priority threshold and therefore did not necessitate alerting the Maker. As such
Robinson responded with the friendly beep rather than the warning beep. It further concluded that if the artifact designated 'beagle' were to lie on its back, gravity connectors thrust skyward, it would make an acceptable addition to Robinson's structure, specifically as a base for the artifact labeled 'empty pizza box' to rest atop.

Robinson watched the beagle move slowly at first and then with increased speed toward the steps marking the perimeter of the designated area. As it vanished from Robinson's optics the robonoid assigned a low probability of it returning and assuming the desired pose.

Still, Robinson would remain vigilant for escape attempts from the designated target and, secondarily, for supplements to its well-engineered structure.

The Maker could rely on Robinson, a fact which the robonoid broadcast to Will in addition to the appended emotive-feedback signal of amusement.

Connie had thought Steven smelled nice before, but that was before she discovered that floral shampoo was a distant second place to the smell of the sloppy joe he’d eaten during lunch and accidentally spilled a little on one pant leg.

She’d met him outside his school, which had so many smells and she’d gotten to lick his face after he came out and recognized her and she was so happy she just wanted to run in circles! So she did!

Steven walked and Connie bounded to a clearing, one that smelled too, faintly of food and strongly of a larger dog. A much larger dog. Also, honeysuckles. It was where she and Steven had fed Wolf on the sly before he’d been adopted into the family. And now it was the perfect place for fetch!

Connie delivered the stick.

"Who's a good girl?" asked Steven, the question one of terrible import.

I AM! barked Connie, never more sure of anything in her life.

"Yes, you are!" and Steven scratched her behind the ears.

Connie's entire canine frame radiating with excitement and validation. The only thing that could make this better would be-

"Oh, hey, I forgot about this stick of beef jerky. Do you want it?" he asked, fishing the snack from his pocket.

Connie leapt in the air, tongue wagging. I DO! OH, I DO! GIMME-GIMME-GIMME!

Steven held it out and she snapped it up and then licked his palm because there were crumbs and then licked his palm because it was his palm and then he laughed and threw the stick and it was the best. Day. Ever!

'Seagull #038' refused to stand in a structurally stable position. Worse, it was attempting, again, to access 'empty pizza box,' an operation which was not permitted.

Robinson's warning beep was ignored. Perhaps 'seagull #038' had faulty I/O channels?

'Seagull #038' flew outside the bounds of the designated area. One-point-three-three seconds later 'beagle' reentered the designated area. Robinson gave the greeting beep after confirming it was
below the confidence threshold of being the designated target.

'Beagle' approached the outermost door and nosed it open. This was in line with previously established expectations. Then the outermost door was wedged open by a square plane of yellow-shaded hard light. This was outside expectations. Robinson watched closely.

The artifact designated 'beagle' used one gravity connector to attempt to push the innermost door open, but that was insufficient to execute doorknob.exe's opening subroutine. Two more planes of rectangular hard light force appeared, which 'beagle' used to ascend to an elevation parallel to the doorknob. Using its input channel designated 'mouth' it pivoted its head sufficient to execute the opening subroutine.

'Beagle' entered the outer dwelling. Robinson devoted extra CPU cycles analyzing the optical data during this time in case the designated target attempted illegal egress during this period.

The innermost door closed. One-hundred-and-forty-three-point-two-six seconds later the last of the yellow planes of hard light vanished. Two-point-nine seconds later the outermost door closed autonomously.

This concluded the cluster of unexpected external events.

Robinson and Will exchanged wireless broadcasts. Nothing met or exceeded the corresponding thresholds and therefore did not necessitate alerting the Maker.

Another nominal day.

Connie padded out from her mom’s room and into the Beach House proper. Then she loped the rest of the way over and rested her head on Lapis’ lap. It smelled like sea salt and snack food.

She looked up at the blue gem with soulful beagle eyes.

Lapis’ own eyes went wide. She opened her mouth but no sound emerged. ‘So cute,’ she mouthed and brought her fist to her mouth, biting a knuckle as if to stifle a squee. A few steadying breaths later she said in a wavering voice, “Dot?”

“Yes?” came a voice from the kitchen.

Connie’s tail immediately started wagging. Food came from the kitchen. *Lunch meat* came from the kitchen.

“Oh, has Connie emerged from her solitude?” finished the kitchen gem.

Lapis spared a glance at Connie. “You could say that.”

There was the sound of plates(!) being set aside in the kitchen and then Peridot came into view, freezing when she saw the beagle.

“I- I forgot just how simultaneously endearing and unsettling that is,” said the green gem in a quiet voice.

With time and help from the same efforts that had allowed Biggs’ to communicate, it came out that Connie had been experimenting with her powers while in her mom’s room and now needed someone to help her get unstuck from this form.

Peridot left to get the frightful vacuum cleaner and ball-you-could-claim-to-throw-but-not-actually-
throw, both items that would help jolt her out of her canine form.

While they waited, Lapis scratched Connie’s ears. “Aw, you’re such a good girl, aren’t you?”

Connie wagged her tail and panted. She wasn’t, she’d been a Bad Dog sneaking out like that, but she wasn’t about to tell the others.

Chapter End Notes

The in-chapter art of Lapis clinging to the ceiling was done by BurdenKing and MJStudioArts.

Lord Stefan and Lady Connaline are a reference to a fine, silly, and venerable Connie Swap omake written by CoreyWW: Creative Writing.

This marks probably the third-to-last update for Notes from the Undergrounded. We'll see you next Wednesday with another exciting addition.

If anyone is so motivated and wants to do a drawing of Lord Stefan, Lady Connaline, or beagle!Connie, I think that’d be awesome. Lemme know in the Discord or hit me up in the comments if you're interested.

Speaking of awesome drawings, NeonJohn has finalized his design for Turquoise, his idea for the hypothetical Lapis-Connie fusion. She's described as playful, goofy, but capable of dramatic shifts in mood which are accompanied by her face/mask flipping to reveal her unhappy face. Powerful weather control with a penchant for both sunny days and thunderstorms.

For completeness sake, here's the earlier sketch comic he did of Steven encountering Turquoise:
Edit: Bingo!

If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

Connie Swap has an official Discord for the fans. [Come check it out](#).

As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the [Connie Swap Tumblr](#). Thanks for reading!
There was one of the six operational orbital platforms, or 'doom cannons' that had needed a fair amount of repairs. Peridot, carrying such materials/tools as she could hold, and Lapis, carrying Peridot, had made many trips back and forth between the cannon and the great blue sphere it was intended to protect.

At first there'd been some air tanks hauled up: a crude way of refilling the atmosphere in their radio helmets. Gems didn't need to breathe but speaking required some sort of gaseous medium.

Then a crude, airtight tent was assembled. Some of the tools required atmosphere to function properly without, for example, overheating in the insulating vacuum of space. But soon after that Lapis had hauled up snacks and entertainment; something to do when Peridot couldn't spare the attention to have a conversation. Plus, Tang just tasted better in zero-gravity: on this both Lapis and Peridot agreed.

All this necessitated expanding the tent, rebuilding it from more durable materials (after one puncture jettisoned the tools and snacks into space, they both agreed the tent needed an overhaul), and hauling up a means of powering the TV and mini-fridge.

And so it was that the ersatz space station --christened 'The Satellite of Love' because Mystery Science Theater 3000 had been a favorite for the pair in the years before Connie was born-- came to be. If the others ever wondered why Lapis and Peridot had to make so many trips to space, they never said; the pair certainly didn't advertise their high-Earth orbit date spot.

The MST3K mocking of This Island Earth was on in the background but the TV was turned way down and ignored. That was because the air was filled with the strains of music, specifically a lively tune called Dramophone by Caravan Palace. Despite the negligible gravity, Lapis and Peridot spun and danced as surely as they had on the Universe family's dance floor over New Year's Eve. A closed container of Tang floated by, pinwheeling lazily through the air as Peridot pulled Lapis into a twirl then spun out herself, the two ending hand-to-hand-equivalent and flowing seamlessly into a rakish strut.

The electro-swing ditty drew to a close as Peridot brought Lapis spinning past and then pulled her in for a deep dip, the gem's blue pigtails brushing the pinkish metal floor. The two had locked eyes, each grinning widely when they noticed the glow from their respective gemstones.

Lapis lifted one eyebrow in wordless invitation. The glow held steady but then Peridot gave a minute head shake. She raised Lapis out of the dip, sat down, and lowered Lapis sideways onto her lap all in one smooth motion, the blue-green light fading away. She pulled the hydrokinetic into a firm squeeze, green head resting on blue shoulder. With a gesture the next upbeat song on the playlist shifted to something more low-key and atmospheric.

Lapis snaked one arm behind Peridot's back and returned the hug, leaning forward to kiss the top of the gem's head. She then reached up to run blue fingers through spongy, yellow hair. "Good dance, Dot," she said softly while the can of Tang continued its very slow and acrobatic dance with microgravity.
Peridot hummed in agreement. "I overheard music from this band while collaborating with the senior Universes in their domicile. The fusion of the swing genre with electronica has proven surprisingly euphonious."

Lapis kissed the top of Peridot's head once more, eyes straying to a porthole where she could see empty space and stars; no twinkle because that only happened under atmosphere. "Speaking of fusion-" She felt Peridot's shoulders tense. "-I just wanted to say that I was cool with the veto." She laid her head on Peridot's memory foam-like hair while below Peridot relaxed slightly. "It was a good time. Us syncing up like that meant it was a good time for both of us. Nothing else." She snuggled into her plush, yellow pillow and let her eyes close.

A few seconds passed and it finally sounded like the Tang had stopped bouncing around like a pinball.

"I hope to fuse with you again, Laz," said Peridot in a gentle voice. "I anticipate the day with a measure of avidness, in fact. But I am enjoying what we have now. It feels... wholesome. And if Connie and Steven are to be believed, Hiddenite will improve as a consequence if this is actually as felicitous as it appears."

Lapis snuggled into her pillow, a corner of her wondering if she could actually talk Peridot into letting her take a nap here. It was comfy... on a number of levels. Eyes still closed, her mouth curled into a smirk. "Plus, Hiddenite would probably end up wearing the Satellite of Love for a hoop skirt."

A chuckle. "As you say, there would be other logistical-"

Lapis heard a beep and behind her eyelids she noticed it growing slightly brighter inside the station. Lassitude seeping into her limbs as a nap, probably doomed, started to happen, Lapis murmured, "What's up, Dot?"

More silence. Then finally, "Lapis?"

Peridot's tone blasted all of Lapis' calm out the airlock. Peridot had many tones of worry or concern and this was one of the bad ones.

Raising her head, Lapis saw a hologram showing lines and arrows and equations. Most of it flew right over her pigtails but the gist was that something from space was headed for Earth. Looked like a ball. If she was reading the alerts right, the doom cannons weren't worried --it wasn't even ship-sized-- but Peridot sure as schist was.

With a sigh Lapis rose from her seat in Peridot's lap. She walked over to the TV where Tom Servo, Crow, and someone who sounded surprisingly like Bill Dewey were making fun of the hackneyed effects as the evil Zagons bombarded Metaluna from space. Lapis switched off the TV and sighed. Then, forcing a smile, she looked over her shoulder and said, "So, am I driving or are you?" wings springing from her gemstone.

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Connie stood at the edge of the cordoned off impact site. Her sword was thrust forward and she was currently blinking her eyes to try and clear away the afterimage of the lightning arc. "Did that work?" she called out.

Peridot's limb enhancer dinged. "Affirmative. The galvanic energy appears to have forced a system-wide restart in the plug robonoid." The technician then half-walked, half-slid down the walls of the impact crater to approach the bot.
It was enormous: a shiny green sphere as wide as Jasper was tall. Thin trickles of smoke were escaping from where floating feet had retracted into the body, the robonoid having only seconds ago been trying to clamber out of the crater.

"Good job, squirt," said Jasper, standing a little ways distant, eyes locked on the threat below.

They were standing on what Connie suspected was the stretch of beach where Steven and she had encountered Pearl and Amethyst so many months ago, back when they'd caught the purple gem hauling salvage to shore for their spaceship. The salvage had come from the Red Eye, a giant, autonomous ship of Homeworld's that Lapis had dragged into the ocean and crushed. Now there was a crater, the salt water seeping through the sand to pool in the bottom, sand blasted as far as the treeline sixty or more feet away by what Lapis had called 'lithobraking and entering.'

The massive robonoid Peridot was attempting to interface with marked the second time Homeworld had sent a high-tech probe to Earth.

Lapis fluttered over, ruffling Connie's (staticky) hair. "Yeah, way to zap-fry that thing, girlie. I bet somewhere inside all of that is a little clock that's now blinking '12:00' over and over."

Connie managed a smile despite a lingering frustration. She'd attempted three times to summon her sword before shocking the robonoid. The first two times she'd tried to put Dr. Brooks' advice into practice, using something other than the memory of her caregivers overruling her at the launch. She thought she'd felt something, especially on the first try, but whatever the case, it wasn't until she fell back on her feelings of righteous indignation that she was able to fully manifest her sword. In the present, her sense of simmering frustration and resentment was only partially the memory's fault.

"Do we know why Homeworld launched a big robonoid at us?" asked the girl, trying to push all that aside and focus on the larger problem.

"I am attempting to ascertain that now," said Peridot. A pair of cables had snaked out of her primary limb enhancer and connected to the robonoid she was partially astride. Holograms appeared and vanished while figures streamed across the inside of her visor-cum-glasses. "I am reasonably confident I have managed to lock the plug robonoid into a maintenance mode that should prevent future ambulations. However, accessing the command directives and objective data will require some time. Hours, perhaps even days. My authorizations are nearly four centuries out of date and apparently no longer valid, so I must attempt to bypass them."

"Hack 'em to pieces," cheered Lapis. "Go, Dot Matrix!"

Connie wasn't sure what to make of that, exactly, but it put a smile on Peridot's face so she was content to remain outside the reference.

"I'll guard while she works," said Jasper, ever vigilant. Glancing in Connie's direction she said, "Let Steven know training is cancelled today." Turning to the blue gem she finished with, "Tell Bismuth about this after taking Connie home."

Lapis gave a sloppy salute then said to Connie, "All boarding Air-Lazuli flight ten-nineteen. Our destination is the Beach House, though we'll be making a stop-over at the Big Donut for refueling." Any worry about Homeworld doing... whatever it was doing was well-hidden from the blue gem's face.

"What's the in-flight movie?" asked Connie with a grin.
"Alive."

From the crater there was a warning, "Laaaz."

Lapis rolled her eyes as Connie climbed into her arms. "Fine, Space Balls."

Peridot looked about to object when she glanced down at the sphere beneath her. "Fair," and then she turned back to the data streaming in front of her.

Steven was snapping photos with his phone, having to stand so the evening sun didn't wash them out. "Cooool," he said. "It's like a tiny Area Fifty-One here!"

Other than Peridot accidentally reawakening the robonoid once --Connie had been flown over and zapped it back into quiescence-- nothing had happened. There were lines worn into the sand and soil from Jasper's patrols.

Peridot looked briefly distracted before nodding her head. "Ah yes. 1947. That was an eventful weekend," and then went back to her work without any further explanation.

Connie and Steven exchanged looks, the girl only able to shrug.

"Any progress, ma'am?" asked Connie a little later.

In the distance an orange figure strode past, ensuring the perimeter remained secure.

"Partial." The technician's voice was calm. Whatever she was doing, spending six-plus hours doing it didn't seem to be bothering her. "More a winnowing of the solution space than anything, I'm afraid. I suspect it would be easier to suborn the plug robonoid entirely than gain illicit access to it's secured data."

Steven blinked then turned to Connie and wiggled his ears. Connie signed back, "[It'd be faster to make the robot work for her than anything else.]

Once more Steven's eyes lit up and he said, "Cooool. Oh! What are we calling to call it? It looks kind of like that big ball robot from The Incredibles but I don't remember its name, or there's BB-8, that rolly droid from the new Star Wars movies, or maybe we could-"

Steven's enthusiastic brainstorming was interrupted by some shrill alarms sounding from Peridot's limb enhancers. Immediately the cloud of diagnostic/intrusion holograms around her vanished and were replaced with something that looked familiar to Connie based on her recent lessons on orbital mechanics.

Jasper came sprinting over. "Peridot?" One word that asked volumes.

"I'm detecting four-" the timber of the alarm shifted slightly. "Make that six more projectiles headed for collision with Earth that match this one in profile. I have updated the orbital array to consider them low-priority threats, to be targeted when nothing more obviously concerning is approaching. That should reduce the number that make earthfall but-" and a sheet of printer paper emerged from her primary limb enhancer, "-here are the projected impact sites."

Jasper hopped down and retrieved the sheet, giving it a quick read and then nodding once. "Understood. I'll scramble Lapis and Bismuth. We'll find them and stop them." The Quartz leapt out of the hole. "Connie, Steven, remain on guard. Protect this site." A final look down and she asked, "Disable or destroy?"
Peridot looked down at the tech beneath her gravity connectors, a hand-equivalent running gently over the smooth surface. Her expression was pained. Jasper waited patiently until, seconds later, Peridot gave a shuddering sigh and said, "Do what you have to."

Jasper nodded then spindashed away, an orange blur rocketing for the nearest warp pad.

Wordlessly Steven had shucked off his backpack and strapped the buckler onto his arm, Connie summoning a force field onto it then turning to watch the horizon for wandering threats. Neither seemed eager to break the air of resigned funk surrounding Peridot just then.

A few minutes later a soft voice from the crater said, "I have a moniker to suggest."

Steven and Connie shared a look and then turned to Peridot, who was once more attempting to override the giant robonoid. The technician caressed the blemish-free chassis and elaborated, saying, "Tik-Tok."

Connie blinked and was about to ask if that meant anything when Steven said, "Wait, from the Oz books?"

He'd told Connie once that he'd read all the Oz books by L. Frank Baum, that they were one of the first book-length stories he'd ever made it all the way through. To which Connie had replied, 'There's more than one?!'

Peridot nodded.

"I love it!" cheered Steven. Then, seeing Connie reaching up to wiggle her ears, he began a rapid-fire summary of the entire Oz saga so he could tell her about the round-bodied mechanical man who helped Dorothy rescue Ozma from the Nome King.

Below, in a quiet voice, Peridot said, "I believe you will find the Earth to your liking, Tik-Tok," and she toggled her screens over to the new task at hand.

---October 20th---

Bismuth, one arm and the bottom half of her body dripping with greenish goop, was jogging over. The smith had been a little reluctant to be pulled away from her forging but that frown had very quickly turned upside down once she'd learned what their objective was.

"Hey Raindrop!" she shouted, cupping her hands to her mouth, ignoring how one of them left a greenish residue on her cheek. "That's my ninth. What are you up to?"

Lapis huffed out a breath, sitting on top of a large block of stone that had been dropped in the sand out front of the Beach House. There were three columns carved into the face of the block, with tallies beneath each. Fluttering down to the sand, Lapis strategically stood in front of the blue column, obscuring the marks on it. "Eleventy-billion. Didn't you hear? I flew to Homeworld while you were gone and dropped an ocean on their bot factories."

Jasper stood nearby and walked over, wordlessly lifting Lapis out of the way so the seven marks in her column were visible.

"Give or take a few," drawled the hydrokinetic, who allowed herself to be hauled aside without resisting.

Bismuth shifted her right arm into a hook and scratched a ninth tally to the grey column, her smirk
at Lapis saying plenty. Then she saw the fourteen in the orange column and whistled. "I guess Jaz got there ahead of you."

"Found Pink Diamond's old ship," said the Quartz with a glimmer of mirth in her eyes. "Took it for a walk."

By the time Bismuth had finished guffawing a klaxon rang out, the television-like device Jasper used to find threats when Peridot wasn’t around resting in the sand nearby. The old cathode ray tube screen lit up, maps flashing across the surface while printouts emerged from the side, a set of coordinates printed on each page.

By the time the sixteenth page came out without sign of slowing, it was Lapis' turn to whistle. She bent down and grabbed up a handful of papers. "Looks like it's time for round two." Then she summoned her wings, said, "Last one to break the sound barrier is a rotten egg," and then accelerated away so fast it made mane and dreadlocks fly.

Jasper handed half of the remaining papers to Bismuth, offered the smith a small nod, and then rocketed away in a spindash that sent sand spraying.

Bismuth shook her head and chuckled. "Show offs," she laughed and turned, bounding for the nearest warp pad.

"-shouldn't count. It landed in the mountains and splatted on impact," insisted Lapis.

Jasper, made even more orange by the setting sun, turned to Bismuth, one eyebrow raised.

"Was it broken or just cracked?" asked the smith.

"Broken," conceded the perfect Quartz. She shrugged her shoulders and then turned to the orange column, using a thick finger to grind away one of the marks. Even then her lead was still commanding.

Just then the warp pad outside the temple flashed, all three heads turning to look its way. A quartet of force fields appeared, each chaining off the next to form a yellow slide all the way to the sand below. A stocky figure pulled out what looked like a burlap sack and then rode it down to the bottom, a 'Weee!' audible on the breeze. A smaller figure suddenly went transparent and then dropped off the temple hand, plummeting for the sand below only to land without sound or impact.

The pair walked over toward the block, the transparent one becoming solid when they were about twenty feet away. Steven had a few splotches of green on him, most notably across the buckler strapped to his arm. In contrast Connie was shellacked, green goop dripping from head to toe. She'd wiped her face clean but everything else had been written off as a lost cause.

Bismuth snickered. Lapis' eyebrows shot up.

Jasper jogged over. "What happened?"

It was Steven who answered. "Another robo-ball dropped kind of near where Miss Peridot is working on Tik-Tok. Oh, she says she's, like eighty percent done, by the way. We ran over and I had my shield up in case anything happened but Connie wanted to zap it so she stepped aside and, uh..." He turned to look at his green-gooped girlfriend.

"Sword slipped," muttered the girl. Reaching up she drew a single green line on the stone's face with her finger. She then turned to trudge toward the Beach House. "I'm going to take all the
showers now," she drawled, pausing only to sign goodbye to her boyfriend.

After the girl had trudged most of the way to the stairs up to the house, Bismuth said, "I'll go get some yellow for the board," and started to jog down the beach.

---October 21st---

Connie awoke to the sound of two elephants tap dancing in cleats. Being woken up by noise at all was still taking some getting used to and the pachyderm percussion section wasn't making the transition any more pleasant.

"Bleh?" was Connie's conversational masterstroke as she rose, looking out from her loft with second degree bed head.

In the dim light of morning was Peridot stepping off the warp pad, being followed by a boulder-sized robonoid. Seven large, floating feet the width of dinner plates were the source of the cacophony, though it became merely loud when the bot transitioned from warp crystal to hardwood floor.

"This is the outer dwelling," said a smiling Peridot, gesturing with limb enhancers like a tour guide. "Sub-designations include kitchen, couch, commander center, and loft where- Oh, good morning, dear. Tik-Tok, assign target sophont designation 'Connie', sub-designations: 'Crystal Gem,' 'gem,' 'human,' and 'progeny alpha' with a priority-nine significance factor."

Connie gave a modest wave and a yawn. The robonoid, Tik-Tok, gave an electronic chirp of greeting that was more resonant than Wally or Claptrap would have given but no lower in pitch. As it turned to survey the room the large yellow star Steven had painted on its side the other day rotated into view.

Outside came the sound of footfalls and conversation, the particulars drowned out in the din of robonoid perambulation. Lapis pulled the door open and then stopped in her tracks, surprised. This resulted in Bismuth walking into her back and Jasper colliding into the smith's.

The blue gem was bowled forward, saved from a pratfall only by the sudden emergence of her wings. Hovering there, eyes traveling up the large, spherical robot, she said, "Whoa. I suddenly feel like a bowling pin about to have a very bad day."

Bismuth stepped around Lapis. "Is this the flipped robot dealie?" One of her hands turned into a mace. "Or did you bring in a tie-breaker for me and Blue?"

Ignoring the others, Jasper looked to Peridot. "Good work."

The green gem had opened her mouth to deliver a retort to Bismuth but faltered, saying instead, "Thank you. Everyone, this is Tik-Tok. Tik-Tok, assign targets in proximity order sophont designations 'Lapis,' 'Bismuth,' and 'Jasper,' sub-designations: 'Crystal Gem' and 'gem,' with a priority-five significance factor."

Lapis, standing on her own feet again, said, "Aw, priority-five? You do care." She paused. "It's a five-point scale, right?"

Peridot glanced at Connie, her grin failing to reach her eyes. "That is a very reasonable assumption to make, Laz," she said quickly.

Once more Jasper cut through the chatter. Jabbing a thumb over her shoulder she said, "We've held
our ground but we’re still on the defensive. Do you have intel? A plan?”

Now it was Connie’s turn to interrupt. "Hey, everyone? Could we have the big important planning session somewhere that isn't keeping me from going to the bathroom and getting dressed?"

Peridot looked chagrined. "Ah, yes. We'll relocate to the porch." Jasper, Bismuth, Lapis, and Peridot then stepped outside as Connie gathered up her clothes for the day.

Tik-Tok stood motionless in the middle of the living room until Peridot cleared the doorway. Then the robonoid bulled forward, slamming into the doorframe like a battering ram, the sphere far too wide to fit through the rectangular exit. The wood of the frame was pulverized but the Era-1 metals beneath, Bismuth’s handiwork, held.

Even though the seven feet remained stationary, the hovering sphere swiveled right then left, stopping when it spotted Lapis’ window seat. Then with sudden speed the robonoid struck the window with a resonant thud. The window, made out of transparent aluminum instead of glass, remained intact but the wood holding it in place did not, the whole thing popping out of frame and landing with a rattling bang on the patio outside.

Utterly implacable, Tik-Tok stepped up and through the former window seat, the top of the robonoid knocking another divot of wood free from the top of the frame.

Several long seconds passed while Peridot buried her face in her hand-equivalent. Finally, sparing a glance at the narrow and fragile-seeming stairs down to the beach, Peridot said, “Tik-Tok and I will use the warp pad to egress. We’ll reconvene at the beach below.”

She started to walk through the doorway but froze, then thought better of it and stepped gingerly through the savaged window seat. Tik-Tok followed dutifully behind, a scattering of wood and drywall falling in the wake of the robonoid’s trip back inside. The two hustled for the warp pad.

As Connie made her way down the stairs she heard Bismuth say with boisterous cheer, "Looks like have some more renovation work to do on the base, eh Jaz?"

---

Connie, dressed for the day and with her unruly hair tamed, jogged across the beach. Robinson was chasing after her, trilling an alarm because Connie hadn't left with a gem escorting her. She figured the others could sort all that out.

Jasper and Bismuth were standing near the score block. "Hey girlie," called Lapis, seated atop it and kicking her bare blue feet. Connie waved and then went insubstantial for a moment. When the noise of the world returned a minute later, the lingering fuzz of sleepiness (and panting from her jog across the beach) was gone.

She did have Robinson trying to shove her back into the Beach House by her shins, however. A quick climb up a force field, though, and she was on the block with Lapis. Robinson chirped with impotent anger below.

Connie looked around. "Where’s Wolf?" she asked. Thinking back, the hound hadn't been in the Beach House during the… eventful wake up. He wasn't here with the others either. It was too early for his Dogbo shift.

Jasper nodded toward the block. "Out hunting."

Connie leaned forward. Near the bottom of the stone were four large paw marks, each the green of robonoid goop.
In the distance a figure was helicoptering their way. A large sphere rolled across the terrain below, the star emblazoned on its side whirling so fast it was a blur. Peridot landed nearby, Tik-Tok rolling to stop a little ways distant and then extending its feet to tromp over.

Robinson bounded over to Peridot, alarm trilling. The ersatz robonoid pointed in Connie's direction accusingly. For a second Connie felt an objection rising to her lips, like she was having to tell off a bratty younger sibling for tattling to mom.

"What? Oh, yes, alarm override," said Peridot, silencing Robinson's warbling alert. Robinson then wriggled out of Peridot's grasp and leapt onto Tik-Tok's chassis, the comparatively tiny, ersatz robonoid scrabbling up like a mountain goat and then settling down.

If Connie wasn't mistaken, the little robonoid was glaring at her. She stuck out her tongue before turning her attention back to the gems below.

"This isn't working," said Jasper.

"It seems to be working for you," said Bismuth, gesturing to the score block. The grey and blue columns were tied but the orange column... wasn't. Also, Connie goggled at the sheer number of tallies present. How many robonoids was Homeworld going to lob at them?

The Quartz shook her head. "Homeworld can send probes at us all day, every day. We're on the defensive," and she said the word with a measure of distaste. Citrine's doctrine was one of relentless, targeted offense, after all. "They only need to succeed once to accomplish their goal."

"What is their goal?" asked Connie.

All eyes turned to Peridot.

The technician looked momentarily taken aback at the attention but then rallied, assuming a didactic pose. "The precise agenda wasn't contained in Tik-Tok's operational data. Rather, the robonoid barrage is a preliminary step to something else: the plug robonoids are programmed to establish a connection with the Prime Kindergarten's control center and then signal for further instructions."

Lapis quirked her head to the side. "They wanna restart the Kindergartens?"

Peridot's lips pursed. "I suspect not. If nothing else, they seem to have no interest in the Beta Kindergarten."

Jasper's eyes narrowed slightly. A beat later she said, "How do we stop their offense?"

"Ah, yes," answered Peridot. She reached out and patted Tik-Tok's flank affectionately. "We make them think they've succeeded. Tik-Tok will enter the Prime Kindergarten control room with us and broadcast the remote connection request. I'll use Tik-Tok's suborned systems as a man-in-the-middle hack to feed them false confirmations that they found or did whatever it is they're hoping to find in the control systems. Then they'll relent."

Lapis' voice dropped a raspy octave, saying, "Dot Matrix is da bomb!" She pumped a fist in the air for added effect.

"Clever, Green," added Bismuth. She clapped a hand on Peridot's shoulder. "Makes me glad you're on our side."

Jasper nodded. "Let's go," and the Quartz was already striding toward the warp pad.
A moment later a reluctant Robinson was retrieved from the top of Tik-Tok and sent back to the Beach House. Connie made a face at the departing tattletale before hopping down from the block and jogging after the others.

As the group walked through the canyon walls of the Kindergarten Connie and Peridot's heads swiveled around like crazy. Connie crouched and gaped at a tiny bud thrusting up from the dusty soil.

There was the glow of Peridot's sensors followed by, "It's growing," the gem's words laced with incredulity.

"Your work?" asked Jasper.

Peridot nodded numbly. Then she shook her head and said, "Mine and Connie's."

Lapis quirked her head to the side. "Eh? When were you and the kinder playing Kindergarten gardeners?"

"January," // "A little after New Year's," said Peridot and Connie over one another.

Lapis curled in on herself a little. "Ah, gotcha."

If they weren't on a time-critical mission, Peridot and her erstwhile lab assistant would have probably stopped to study the first tentative growths in a Kindergarten... ever. Instead Peridot pulled Connie into a side hug, saying as they walked, "Whatever else may happen, I find this an extremely validating turn of events. I hope you do as well."

Connie smiled up at the technician and nodded.

A few minutes later the whole group was crammed together, standing on a hidden lift that was conveying them down to the control room. Connie had gone insubstantial to free up some room and Lapis had flitted up to sit atop Tik-Tok, Peridot following her a moment later. Even then it was a crowded ride down into the earth.

Flitting through the four 'scapes, Connie could see just how deep Peridot's newfound pride was and she assumed that, were she able to glimpse it, she'd see something similar in her own mindscape. Life was returning to the Kindergarten!

Two things stood out to Connie as soon as they reached the control room. Firstly, Jasper or Peridot had cleaned up all the debris from their baffling encounter/battle with the disembodied gem limbs that had been released in January. Secondly, there were vines and buds growing from some of the exposed panels in the wall!

Substantial once more, Connie breathed out, "Woowow," in a soft voice.

While Jasper immediately swept the area for threats, Bismuth prodded one of the bulbs. "Tenacious little things. I thought plants needed sunlight to grow."

Peridot was torn between blazing curiosity, naked triumph, being appalled at life infesting delicate mechanisms, and trying focus on the mission at hand. While directing Tik-Tok onto the control platform she did glance up at the steady glow of the screen and say, "Ah, this display emits full-spectrum light. I had never considered it before, but a sufficiently bright full-spectrum hologram would be capable of enabling photosynthesis."
"Area secure," reported Jasper. She looked at Peridot expectantly.

"Ah, yes. Erm, I think it would be wise if everyone were to retreat from the control platform while I worked with Tik-Tok," cautioned the technician. "The inexplicable has happened in this chamber before and I'd rather you all were clear of any further surprises."

With that the others stepped back, Connie taking the time to gawk at more of the growing buds. She even snapped a few pictures, then realized that Steven had never seen the control room and took a few more for his benefit.

Lapis gave Bismuth bunny ears when she took a group photo.

Minutes passed and finally Peridot called out, "Initiating remote connection request now." The gem had a cable from one limb enhancer connected to the bank of green, metal-and-crystal controls. A cable from the other enhancer was connected into Tik-Tok's flank, the robonoid standing there stoically.

Everyone went quiet.

A beat passed and then Peridot announced, "Remote request accepted! Detecting incoming network activity, and- Yipe!"

The large holographic screen on the wall, which had been giving off a dim white light, suddenly showed a larger-than-life green figure visible from the shoulders up. She was a Peridot with a triangular gemstone at the base of her throat. The stone and the projected technician had dark green splotches mottling them, including a large one that covered her left eye and part of her face.

"This is Peridot Facet-2B2Y Cut-5XG recording. I have established a gem projecting link with-" said the massive, projected gem before the image froze.

"It's that Peridot from the Galaxy Warp," said Bismuth, her hand becoming an axe head.

"I didn't realize there was a preprogrammed channel for the projection," squawked Peridot, hurriedly typing into her own holographic console. "I've locked her out of the real feed and am now conveying falsified report data and telemetry."

"Can she hear us from that screen?" asked Jasper.

"Negative."

"Then put her back on. Useful intel," said the Quartz.

Peridot's seven fingers were a blur of activity and then the screen came alive.

"-to perform status check of the Kindergarten." The projected gem hummed a merry little tune while she worked, the walls in the background a light pink, empty save for a few lines Connie took as the outline for doors.

Connie felt a curious sensation in the bottom of her stomach. It was probably two parts fear, two parts combat readiness, and one part curiosity. This was, after all, her first time to see an actual Homeworld gem. Well, except Pearl, but a deep and vocal part of Connie's soul insisted she was an exception.

"Now accounting for all operational injectors," said the on-screen gem.
Below, Peridot was working as furiously as she'd ever seen her, her seven fingers hammering at the holographic displays.

*If they talked to each other, would they call each other Peridot?* Connie wondered. *That would get so confusing so fast,* she concluded. Another corner of her realized that perhaps Lapis' habit of giving everyone nicknames was older than her joining the Rebellion.

Connie thought she saw movement in the left-hand corner of the display, a flash of pink against a pink background. Then the other Peridot was speaking again. "Checking for aberrations in the perimeter. Everything appears nomin- Huh. I was expecting the archaic, Era-1 data format but I'm getting everything in modern formatting instead."

Below, Peridot, *the Peridot,* was looking helplessly at the Era-2 limb enhancers that were feeding spoofed data into Tik-Tok.

"Ah!" chirped the Peridot on-screen. "There's an unexpected layer being interfaced with. I'll just wipe that out and reestablish the connection. Preparing macro for-"

*That's it!* objected a vocal corner of Connie. *Peridot is Peridot is Peridot. Period-ot. This new Peridot is henceforth dubbed P2.*

Peridot yelped, the cables snaking back into the limb enhancers as she hopped back a step like she'd been burned. Or worse, like she'd had someone threaten to wipe out the software governing her limb enhancers.

P2 blinked, her chipper expression suddenly bewildered, her eyes lowered to some secondary screen. "Why is the- Oh! Archaic data format restored. Engaging analyzer and..." Satisfied with whatever was going on below, her eyes drifted up and she looked at the Crystal Gems staring back at her.

Owlishly, P2 blinked then peered forward, her visored eyes filling the giant screen. Connie thought she saw Lapis give a meek wave.

"Stars!" exclaimed the giant, projected peepers. Her face pulled back and Connie could see a lopsided but wide grin lighting up her face. "Oh, hello!" she said chipperly. "You must be the Crystal Gems. Or Crystal Jerks. Actually, which did you identify as, because the reports are conflicting."

Everyone glanced at everyone else, no one speaking up first when something chimed on P2's side, the amplified figure looking down. "Huh. There's some sort of interference over the connection." Just then Tik-Tok rotated in place so it was looking at Peridot where she had covertly jacked into the control panel and was typing away.

P2 once more peered forward as if trying see something on another screen. Then, coming from Tik-Tok was the voice of P2. "The rebel Peridot! Oh, I really like your hair!"

Peridot seemed unsure in that moment. "Th-Thanks?" she managed, the words inflecting up into a question.

P2 spoke further through Tik-Tok. "You're very welcome! You must be trying to keep me from properly accessing the Kindergarten systems given your misguided rebel allegiance. I had to tap into a meaningful percentage of the station's computing power to overcome some of your countermeasures," she said in what Connie assumed was meant to be a compliment.

"Hey! That's cheating!" barked Peridot.
The P2 on the screen quirked her head to the side. "Cheating?" She shook her head. "No, it's just unfair. I have both more and more advanced technological resources at my disposal which is why I'm able to succeed," she explained convivially.

Peridot huffed and stammered for a second, clearly unhappy with this line of conversation. Meanwhile, Connie noticed that Jasper had ghosted left while Bismuth had ghosted right, each circling to flank the control platform.

P2 seemed to notice. "Would you all please return to where you were standing? I can't keep an eye on you all for possible sabotage if you split up like that." She tsked and said to herself, "This would be so much easier if I could access the control room limb proxies."

Connie meanwhile, made meaningful eyes at Lapis, the one gem still near her, then summoned her sword while using the blue gem to hide it from sight. She began covertly channeling electricity into the blade.

"No, this won't do," muttered P2. "Beginning robonoid rampage sequence."

"Wait!" cried Peridot. She turned to the two large rebels on the verge of rushing the platform. With a gesture and a pleading look from Peridot, the two returned to stand beside Connie and Lapis.

Surreptitiously a cable had snaked out of her limb enhancer and hooked into Tik-Tok's side.

"Ah, much better," said the large figure of P2, Tik-Tok pivoting slightly to better watch the group. "Now I just need to connect properly to the Kindergarten controls. I-" She blinked. Tik-Tok, meanwhile, had gone statue-still. "I- Why isn't the plug robonoid responding?"

"Because," crowed Peridot, the cable snaking back into her limb enhancer, "I've trapped the robonoid in an infinite software loop. I may not be able to break your connection, but I can disable your physical proxy, rendering you helpless."

P2 scowled and the way she shifted on screen made it look like her limb enhancers had gone to her hips. "Well, that's quite rude of you."

Peridot marched in front of the screen and struck a bold pose. "You will in no way gain remote access to this planet's Kindergartens! We, the Crystal Gems, will thwart you!"

The projected gem shook her head. "This is frustrating. And it's going to put me even further behind schedule. I can see why Amethyst referred to you all as jerks." Giving a shrug she leaned forward until her face filled the screen, then she said in a polite voice, "Please cluster together for a moment while I set this robonoid to detonate; the blast effectiveness falls off sharply with distance."

Before anything could happen a pink figure walked into frame, voluminous pink curls spilling over her shoulders, a pink gemstone visible at her navel. She placed a hand on P2's shoulder and said something in a gentle whisper that didn't come across the audio.
P2 looked over her shoulder at the pink-haired gem but the woman was already retreating back out of frame. The projected technician sighed and said, "Oh, I suppose." Looking once more at the Crystal Gems, who by this time had scattered and, in Connie's case, hunkered down behind a force field bunker, she said, "Disregard the previous threat of obliteration. I guess I'll see you all later."

She did a few more things, fingers working out of frame, then she reached up and waved with a limb enhancer as pristine as Peridot's wasn't. "Bye!" she said and then the screen returned to a featureless white.

Connie's inner Steven offered a cheery 'Bye!' in return. Connie got as far as starting to raise her hand when she noticed and vetoed that response. Hard.

Silence reigned in the Kindergarten control room after that.

"So," said Lapis, breaking the silence a moment or an eternity later. The gem rose from where she'd been hiding behind Jasper's bulk. "That just happened."

Then an arc of lightning shot out striking Tik-Tok, the robonoid's floating feet retreating back into the body as it shut down, becoming a featureless green sphere.

Connie, standing just to the side of her force field bunker, sword pointed forward, said, "Sorry. Had to be sure about the, uh, not exploding thing." She looked across the other gems. "Was that Rose Quartz?"

Chapter End Notes

The in-chapter art was drawn by MJStudioArts and BurdenKing.

And speaking of art, wowee! MJ and Burden really delivered, didn't they? In case
you're interested in this sort of thing, here's the image from the display head-on:

I love the video distortion effect MJ added.

I also asked Burden to save the Prime Kindergarten control room background he did so I could share it with y'all as it's own thing:

If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

Connie Swap has an official Discord for the fans. [Come check it out](https://discord.com).  

As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the [Connie Swap Tumblr](https://connieswap.tumblr.com). Thanks for reading!
No further plug robonoids fell to Earth. The few that hadn't already been smashed had been rendered nonfunctional by some remote command. According to Peridot --after spending several hours doing the technological equivalent of a post-mortem on one such bot-- their software had been wiped and their circuitry fried. What remained was a spherical pile of inert Era-2 materials.

She was visibly sad as she delivered the report.

Fortunately Tik-Tok had been spared this fate, the robonoid still mid-reboot when the remote command had been broadcast. Peridot had offered Connie a crushing hug of gratitude when that had come to light.

What followed was a cleanup effort, tracking down the strays because, as Jasper put it, 'leaving a couple working ones out there as a future surprise is what Citrine would have ordered.'

What she conspicuously didn’t say but Connie heard all the same was, 'Rose Quartz might have had the same idea.'

It was morning the next day and there was only one robonoid left to get. The problem was that it'd landed in the quarry on the edge of town.

It was stiflingly hot in the quarry despite October turning fairly cool by now. Connie's gemstone was glowing when the Nightmare Monster flicker-ran forward, the creature probably half-again as large as Tik-Tok. It dropped a stick at Connie's feet and the two played a game of fetch for a few minutes, all while Connie's gem glowed with a penumbral, black-tinged-yellow light.

As the game continued a thought that had been bothering Connie came to the fore. She was frowning from more than the negative energy exposure by the time the Nightmare Monster leaned in, touching what passed for its forehead to Connie's.


Connie recognized it now as the emotions removed from the corrupted gems in her mom's sanctuary. And, having spent hours gazing at the 'scape of one of them, Connie could all-too-easily envision those minds as well.

After the emotions finished washing over her, after the stifling heat retreated, after the glow of Connie's gemstone had dimmed near to nothing, Connie looked down at the sleeping, infant-like shadow creature in her arms.

She looked around the quarry, seeing where the inert green sphere of the alien invader sat, previously untouchable. She saw the places where Sadie, Jenny, Buck, and Sour Cream had once been imperiled by the eldritch monster lurking on the edge of town. She looked overhead, where high, high above Lapis was circling, the gem keeping an eye on things from as close as she dared get.

Connie shook her head. "This is stupid," she said. Then she turned and walked toward the path up out of the quarry, clutching the shadow to her chest.
As she was walking toward the road, the Universe family barn visible in the semi-near distance, Lapis landed nearby. "Hey girlie. You finish doing your- GAH!"

There was a blur of movement and then a voice from about fifty feet overhead called down, "The heck are you doing, Con-con?! I doubt Inky needs a walk."

Connie, mouth still a thin line, called up, "We're doing something dumb. I'm fixing that," and then she walked the rest of the way to the warp pad near the barn in silence.

The stygian figure vanished into a crack running down one of the geodes. Connie looked around the gorgeous and, most importantly, remote landscape of Mask Island.

She nodded to herself, pleased. After all, she'd just removed a calamity waiting to happen from the Crystal Gems' doorstep. She'd made Beach City --whose town motto, *Noli commoveri*, was Latin for 'Try not to freak out'-- marginally safer. And, when she had to come back and purge the Nightmare Monster again in the upcoming months, she'd be going to a pretty island she could warp to instead of an abandoned quarry she had to hitch a ride to reach.

Connie vanished from the warp pad pretty happy with this decision.

Perhaps twenty minutes later, Connie warped back and sat down on the warp crystal. She folded her feet under her and closed her eyes as if meditating. Perhaps ten minutes later several dozen miniature black Connies were ejected from the girl's gemstone, all of them swiftly shifting into forms that were unrecognizable.


Less than a minute later, just when the tricksters were starting to mill about in their peculiar, flicker-movement way, the warp pad chimed once more.

"And no gunking up the warp pad either," said Connie in a stern voice and with a posture that was, unbeknownst to her, very reminiscent of Peridot's.

The warp pad flashed once more and the girl was gone. She had a therapy session to attend and some emotional problems were best exorcised on a remote island than in a cozy, tea-scented office.

The shadow tricksters flicker-moved away, off to do whatever it was they did.

The warp pad remained pristine in the bright, tropical sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

Credit for Beach City's motto goes to Cyberwraith9, who passed the hilarious suggestion along in an AO3 comment. And credit for the Latin translation goes to leo60228 from the Connie Swap Discord. Thanks!

I also want to point out a new and timely addition to the Omake Collection:

*) Colored Perception is NOT Covered by the Warranty by Wierdkid20 - "After the testing is over Bismuth learns she needs to up her standard of indestructible."
We'll see you next Wednesday for the final chapter(s) of Episode 33!

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As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the Connie Swap Tumblr. Thanks for reading!
BR42 here. The chapters going up today were supposed to be the end of Ep33. However, a personal matter arose yesterday which made it impossible for me to finish writing and editing the latter half of the content. So what's going up now is the first half of the update, polished and proofed, while the second part will go up soon.

When is soon? I'm not entirely sure at this point because, reasons. Probably no earlier than Friday and certainly no later than next Wednesday. Whatever the case, the schedule is as follows:
Wed. May 8th: Ep33Ch13 and 14 go up.
Wed. May 15th: Ep33Ch15+ have gone up somewhere in there and we have an off-week.
Wed. May 22nd: Ep34 begins.

I hope y'all enjoy chapters 13 and 14.

--- November 6th ---

Diced potatoes went into the frier, the hot oil sizzling and popping in response. Ronaldo flinched back --he was wearing his sixth-most favorite Koala Princess shirt, after all; a gift which an avid truth-seeker had gotten signed by none other than the show's assistant inker-- but he was wearing his apron so it was fine.

Peedee, who had been the one to remind him to put on the apron, gave him a wan smile and then turned back to his peeling, a pile of potato skins growing on the table beside him. Tantalizingly, a phone with a Koala Princess-themed cover rested across from his little brother.

Dad walked over, staring into the sizzle with an expert's eye. He hummed appraisingly, rubbing the hair on his chin. Then he made a satisfied nod, one hand clapping on Ronaldo's shoulder. "Good job, son. I can tell you remembered to preheat the oil this time, and you didn't overfill either."

Ronaldo's eyes had long ago been opened to Truths that were larger than proper frymanship. His dad, however, was more... focused. Until one of the Conspiracy's baleful plots targeted fried potatoes, Dad was content to remain unenlightened.

"Good enough you'll let me update my blog?" asked Ronaldo hopefully.

His dad's mouth became a thin line. "After the lunch rush," he conceded.

Outside of the fry shop there was a bark, the light-orange revenant arriving for his shift. Dad turned for the back door. "I'll get Wolf into his Dogbo costume. Then I've got that meeting with the ketchup vendor. Peedee, Ronaldo, hold down the shop while I'm gone."

"Sure Dad," // "Alright," said Peedee and Ronaldo over one another.

Ronaldo tended to the frier until there was the click of the door closing. Finally! Ronaldo whirled,
apron twirling with the motion. Who knew what malfeasance the Conspiracy had-

"No."

Ronaldo blinked, already reaching for his phone.

Peedee gestured with his peeler and shook his head. "Dad said not until after the lunch rush."

The larger Fryman stared at his brother. Or did he? Ronaldo crossed his arms. "Lemon sorbet," he challenged.

The alleged Peedee sighed. Had his tooth gap always been on that side? "Fresh peppercorn," he answered, correctly giving the day's question-and-response. Good.

Ronaldo nodded. Then he chewed his lip. His hand started to drift toward his phone. If he didn't check then-

"You need boundaries, Ronaldo," replied Peedee. "Dr. Brooks says it's important to have an external indicator for regressive behavior. It's why twice-in-a-row is the most I'm allowed to wash the..." He trailed off.

"But the Conspiracyyy," whined Ronaldo.

Peedee sighed --Peedee gave impressive sighs; one more point in favor of him not being a snerson duplicant-- and set down his peeler and potato. "If I check for you, will you get back to the fries?"

Ronaldo nodded, thick yellow hair bobbing as he did.

Peedee waited until Ronaldo was back at the friers before he picked up the phone. He tapped at it and frowned. "It says I need a password."

"Ah yes. I would never leave my access point to the Truth unsecured. If the Conspiracy wants to get at me, they'll have to try for it!" he said, one hand rising dramatically into a clenched fist, just like Namakemono-Kun did in the *KP* seventh season semi-finale.

There was the sound of the fries sizzling and the occasional, distant bark.

"Riiight," said his brother. "So, the password?"

Ronaldo opened his mouth to speak, then he looked around the shop interior. He'd swept the place for listening devices earlier but had the- No, he was safe in his starchy sanctum. For now, anyway.

"In the *Drizzle Do'Urmine* series, the Master of Secrets guards his vault with a substance feared by all for its undetectable lethality: Drow's Sap," intoned Ronaldo, speaking with gravity.

Another sigh. "Uh-huh. So that's the password? Can you spell it out for me?"

"D-R-O-W-S-S-A-P," all uppercase." One of the friers beeped and Ronaldo lifted the basket out of the oil. "With no spaces or punctuation," he added.

Peedee muttered something under his breath. Then he squinted at the screen. "Uh, hey bro? That didn't work."

Ronaldo got the next batch of fries started. "Naturally not," he said in a serious tone. "I wouldn't use something so obvious. No, to throw off the Conspiracy's intrusion efforts, I type it in reverse."
"Oh. P-A-S-S-W..."

Peedee gave a sigh that dwarfed all the others, a sigh for the ages. A world-weary titan troubled by the weight of eons couldn't have done better.

Password entered, the phone unlocked. There was a chime: new messages awaited.

Lunch rush over, Ronaldo floated through the ether, a being of pure intellect drifting through a continuum of distilled information as-

The loading icon appeared again, the wireless connection stalling out. *Again.*

"Gah!"

Meanwhile, in the front of the shop, he heard Connie, the astute polymorphic rock-human hybrid, ordering something from his little brother.

"As spicy as you can make them," added Bismuth, her louder voice coming through clear. Ah yes, the fist-forger, ousted when the Great Diamond Authority turned to the Peridontist clade to build their stellar hand-ships. The shame of her demotion was so great it had taken her thousands of years to reform from her phylactery.

"One order of fries, regular, and one order of extra spicy fries," called Peedee.

Ronaldo stared at the loading icon, wondering if the design was something meant to undermine his resolve. If so-

"Ronaldo! Come on!" cried Peedee.

The page finally loaded. "No time for fries, Peedee," answered Ronaldo, scrolling to the message details. "A fellow truth-seeker has found something of grave import and-"

*Loading icon.*

"*Jenny needs to stop streaming music* because it's making Fish Stew Pizza's WiFi super slow! The Truth is more important than-*" The door clicked shut. "-traversing a heavy metal playlist!"

The message loaded in its entirety. While trivial matters like french fries were dealt with beyond, Ronaldo sat in his inner sanctum --which happened to also be a breakroom/dry goods supply room- - and opened his mind to the latest twistings of the wider, weirder world.

He gasped. This... This was eldritch even by *his* standards. This might very well be the single greatest, most important find he or his fellow truth-seekers had yet uncovered. The polymorphic rock guardians needed to be informed of this.

But first, he had to *update his blog!*

Thumbs flying across the screen, Ronaldo crafted his post. It was his fervent desire that this would help boost the Truth's spread.

Hopefully the *KBCW* view count too.

"Peedee!"
His little brother, arms thrust into a stainless steel sink that was overflowing with soapsuds, startled, a little soapy water slopping over the sides in the process.

He scowled at the mess then turned to Ronaldo, his expression softening to one of worry. "What is it?"

"Connie and the fist-forger? Where are they?" Ronaldo asked while looking around the shop interior. He couldn't step outside his sanctum unshielded and his tinfoil-lined fedora wasn't where he'd left it. Had the Conspiracy sent agents to hobble him?!

A thin arm with bubbles up the elbow pointed to the window sill above the friers. There sat his fedora.

Ah yes, he'd set it there as a ruse to confound any spies; they'd see his famously fashionable headwear and assume he was trapped on frier duty rather than furthering the cause of Truth! Also, his forehead got really sweaty working at the friers and the tinfoil lining meant the hat didn't breathe very well.

Turning back to his washing, Peedee said, "Connie and Bismuth --that's who I assume you mean, anyway-- left, like, two hours ago. Bismuth finished giving out weapons and then they walked back to their house. I haven't seen them since."

Two hours?! Diabolical! The Conspiracy must have placed a time dilation device around the fry shop perimeter. It would explain how his shifts sometimes felt like they took days instead of hours to finish.

"Very well," said Ronaldo, slipping his hat firmly into place, his brilliant mind speeding ahead to parry this latest foul ball in his grand chess match with the Conspiracy. "I'll leave a message in the light-orange revenant's shadow way terminal."

He was scrambling for pen and paper when Peedee cleared his throat. "If you mean Wolf..." He paused in his scrubbing. "Do you mean Wolf?"

Ronaldo nodded, then had to reach up and put his hat back in position. He grabbed a pen from beside the cash register and swiped a napkin and set to writing.

"Wolf's shift got ended early. Some big mission business going on. Steven texted me about it because he's going too."

Finishing his note, Ronaldo hustled for the door. "Don't they realize more important things are afoot than gravelkin containment?" he said, shaking his head at their folly.

"Just be back in time to do inventory or Dad's gonna take your phone for the rest of the weekend again," called Peedee after him.

That... wasn't an idle threat. Dad's punishments were never harsh, the large man clearly unhappy following through with them, but once the phone went into the potato storage room for the weekend, it stayed in the potato storage room for the weekend.

"I'll hurry," he shouted back as he half-ran, half-rolled down the boardwalk, the wheels in his heels lending him added speed and helping obscure his footfalls from the Conspiracy's subterranean monitoring equipment.

Pounding on the door hadn't worked. The window looked like it had recently been replaced so he'd
checked for hidden catches or latches in case it was a secret entrance; no one would suspect a hidden entrance through a window when there was a door right there, a hiding place so obvious he’d feel foolish not checking. Still, he found nothing. There must be a hidden entrance to the hidden entrance somewhere and he didn't have time for a fuller investigation.

He'd even posted to his blog about the urgent situation but no response from the Crystal Gems had come.

There was a chirp nearby, the Peridontist's spherical servitor addressing him.

"Hello spheritor." Ronaldo knelt so he could look the construct directly in the sensors.

And because it looked more dramatic this way.

"I have a message for your lime-fueled mistress. The fate of more than one world hinges on her receiving this. Also, if I don't get back to the fry shop soon, I'm going to lose phone privileges for nearly thirty-six hours. So I'm entrusting this to you," and he held out the note.

The spheritor took it, giving an electronic chirp... of destiny.

Ronaldo nodded. "Wheels are turning, events are in motion, and soon this hollow Earth of ours may tremble with the clash of great powers." His phone chirped at him; a warning from Peedee that he needed to hurry. "I bid you well, spheritor." Then he turned to descend the stairs. However, he brought one heel down wrong, the wheel inside sliding on the step and it was all Ronaldo could do to keep from tumbling all the way down to the beach below.

Robinson scanned the document, broadcasting a mix of pleasure and curiosity. After all, it would make an adequate addition to its observation structure, something to lend further stability to one corner where a small gap existed between the artifact labeled 'empty pizza box' and the artifacts batch-labeled 'beverage containers'.

However, while the messy writing was beyond the abilities of Robinson's textual analysis software to translate, there was a uniform resource locator (alternate designation: 'URL') written slightly more legibly below. Tapping into the outer dwelling's wireless communication grid, Robinson navigated to the indicated World Wide Web page.

It was a collection of reports, some including locations and individuals that Robinson's file archive rated as significant.

Will and Robinson communicated wirelessly before concluding that this was below the priority threshold needed to recall the Maker from the activity 'important mission.' But the alert was already queued for when the Maker returned.

Robinson then archived the optical data relevant to the message. That accomplished, the artifact was free for other uses. Like reducing the wobble in the south-east corner of the observation struction.

Chapter End Notes

If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here
in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

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As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the Connie Swap Tumblr. Thanks for reading!
Everyone was home. Between Bismuth and Wolf, the couch was pretty much claimed. Connie and Steven sat on the stairs to the loft, Connie a few steps up so she could drape her arms over Steven's shoulders and watch the briefing with her head nuzzled up to his. Lapis had winged up to a rafter. Peridot paced in the open space in front of the couch while a line of eight robonoids followed after her like ersatz ducklings following a green mother duck. Jasper stood at a parade rest nearby, letting Peridot speak and nudging Johnny back into line when it inevitably got off track.

"Before we begin, are there any initial questions?" asked Peridot.

Wolf lifted his paw in the air. Then Bismuth started scratching him behind the ears and the paw went back down, his question seemingly answered.

Connie's hand went up. Steven glanced over his shoulder then raised his own hand in solidarity. This brought a snicker from the pair on the stairs.

"Yes Connie? ...And Steven?"

"Why are the robonoids out for this, ma'am?" asked Connie.

"And where's Tik-Tok?" added Steven.

Peridot slowed to a stop, causing a chain of robonoid collisions behind her, a slapstick illustration of the conservation of momentum. "The charging crèche I have now is built for flask robonoids and fabricating one for a plug robonoid is taking time. As an interim solution, I have rigged together a converter that allows Tik-Tok to charge via the flask robonoid crèche, though it leaves these eight at loose ends. I have domestic tasks planned for them once we depart for our mission."

Bismuth's hand went up next, the smith still sooty and blackened in places from whatever it was she'd been doing in the forge before warping over. "I've got one: what's the latest on the Kindergarten? Do you know what Homeworld wants with it?"

While Bismuth had been busy in her forge almost continuously, since the encounter with P2 she’d made a point of warping over for details now and then. But since Peridot had been spending most of her time examining the Kindergarten control room, the two had managed to miss one another throughout.

Peridot shook her head, body language radiating frustration. "That Kindergarten is governed by a hodgepodge of original, pre-Rebellion controls that were sabotaged by Citrine and Rose Quartz-"

At the name of the pink gem, there was a raspberry blown up in the rafters. Jasper gave a curt nod of agreement.

"Yes, well, Citrine and Rose-"

Another raspberry.
Peridot glared upward. Lapis kicked her heels and smiled back down from the rafters.

"Citrine and her co-reb-"

Raspberry.

"Are you quite finished?"

Lapis' grin widened. "I am now. Go ahead, Peri-berry."

"There's the pre-Rebellion controls that sustained heavy damage. These were built over and damaged several times during the Rebellion itself, including a baffling final control strata that must have happened near the latter half of the conflict," continued Peridot. "What I have discovered therein is a hidden, parallel control architecture that touches on a number of Kindergarten subsystems and is locked behind Diamond-grade encryption."

This was met with a whistle from Bismuth. "That must be hiding something big."

Peridot nodded. "That is my supposition as well. I have done more to add alerts and obstacles to future, Homeworld access attempts. However, to the objective itself, cracking that caliber of encryption would border on the mathematically impossible."

"OJ could punch it," said Lapis.

Peridot shook her head. "That wouldn't help."

"I could punch it," offered Bismuth.

"That would be equally unproductive."

"I can zap it," said Connie, the girl largely eclipsed by her fluffy haired beau.

Peridot smiled against her will, the others' irreverence getting to her. "Thank you, but I must decline."

Lapis threw her hands in the air, fingers brushing the ceiling. "You heard it, everyone: violence isn't the answer and that's all we're good for. Guess we'll have to leave it to Dot Matrix to gizmo something up."

There was a collection of chuckles, chirps, and happy pants from the people, robonoids, and magical animals, respectively.

"Though I'm pretty sure there's something out there that needs a good walloping," added the blue gem, giving Peridot her opening.

"Yes, which segues nicely to the mission at hand," said Peridot, offering the gem overhead a smile. "Beginning in late January a corrupted gem was detected in central Asia, activity mostly constrained to the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts. It is of similar scale to the Centipeetle matriarch and no combination of me, Jasper, or Lapis have been able to defeat it."

Connie quirked her head to the side... and not just to nuzzle against Steven. "Why did this never come up?"

Bismuth nodded too at the question.
"Our failed attempts at overcoming the foe are less because of its hostility and more because of its
timidity," explained Peridot.

"It digs," said Jasper. "We show up, it sends minions at us then digs away."

"Succinctly put," agreed Peridot. "As none of us are able to pursue a burrowing foe, and because it
seems content to remain in a largely uninhabited region, it was deemed a low-priority target and
generally ignored."

Steven shrugged, causing Connie's head to rise and fall in tandem. "That makes sense. It's like the
sand-version of the living island monster-lady."

Connie's brow furrowed slightly as she locked eyes with Peridot. "What's changed?"

The technician raised her rebuilt limb enhancer. "Two things. Firstly, the corruption's passage
generates a large amount of seismic 'noise' that lowers the fidelity of my sensor network in the
region. That was tolerable before, but with the threat of active, Homeworld incursions, leaving a
vast swath of this planet's largest landmass unscrutinized would be folly. And secondly, well, you,
dear."

Connie raised her head from Steven's shoulder. "Me?" she asked, tone inflecting up in surprise.

A hint of a smile graced Jasper's face. "You can force an engagement; enrage it so it doesn't
burrow away."

All eyes and sensors turned to face Connie. Overhead a laughing voice said, "Feel like playing in
the sandbox?"

Connie recovered from being put on the spot and smile. "Let's do it!"

Steven immediately cheered, stomping his sandaled feet on the step below him. "Woo! Finally a
flip flop-friendly mission!"

"-told Kiki that I didn't know what was really going on but if she needed someone to talk with
about it, I could recommend someone."

Connie was talking with Steven, the two at the center of the group while Bismuth and Lapis took
the flanks. Peridot and Jasper led and Wolf padded along from behind. The ground was a mixture
of rocky and sandy, with only a few gnarled scrubs growing in the blasted terrain. It was dawn this
far away from Beach City so it was, if anything, pretty chilly, a fact which compelled a
disappointed Steven to switch out his sandals for boots instead. At least he was toasty under his
armor, he claimed.

"You mean Jeff's mom?" asked Steven, having bounced back from his sandaled setback with his
usual ebullience.

Connie nodded, hands gripped around the straps of her backpack. "I gave her Dr. Brooks' card and
said that she was helping me and Peedee with some things."

"You know you could just do like your momma and cut to the chase," drawled Lapis. The gem had
no fewer than six canteens of water on her, declaring the desert region 'a place of profound
suckitude for a gem like her.'

Connie shook her head. "Nope. It's not my business, there's no guarantee the fix would work, and
it'd be temporary whatever the case. I'd have to keep reapplying it if it was going to last."

"You planning on moving outta town?" pressed Lapis.

"No, but-" Connie reached for Steven's hand as she huffed out a breath. "Look, Mom did things her way. And that worked for her, and it seems like it worked for you all."

Lapis nodded but Jasper and Peridot very conspicuously didn't react at all.

"But I want things to get better long-term." Preempting Lapis' remark, Connie said, "Intrinsically long-term improvement, not just me reapplying the same band-aid over and over."

Steven had been looking thoughtful during the discussion. Now he tweaked the communicator over his eye so that his voice sounded like it was coming from right in front of the gems. "Have any of you guys thought of making an appointment with Dr. Brooks? It might be nice to have someone you can tell stuff to that you can trust but who isn't another Crystal Gem."

The group walked in silence for a while before three voices answered in succession.

"I appreciate the invitation, but I don't believe I will avail myself of Dr. Brooks', erm, speciality," replied Peridot.

"Yeah, no. Sorry, Meatball," said Bismuth, her hand shifting through a number of different tools and weapons.

"I'd really hate to break Con-con's shrink while she's still using her," quipped Lapis.

Several eyes turned to Jasper, who just grunted as she surveyed their surroundings, vigilant for threats.

The conversation lapsed after that until, about twenty minutes later, a plume of sand drew everyone's attention. Lapis flew off, circled the area, and returned. "There's our scaredy cat. Scaredy mole? There's our target."

"What kind of gem is she?" asked Bismuth.

Peridot and Jasper shared a look, the former shrugging. "We're unsure. We haven't seen a corruption of comparable appearance. The burrowing is equivalent to the earth manipulation a Biggs Jasper is capable of, but there are few other similarities. Furthermore, the psammokinesis, or sand manipulation, is wholly novel and we've never encountered a Quartz corruption that was thelytokous-capable."

"Thely-what?" asked Steven.

"Makes little monsters," said Lapis. "Those are fun since no gemstone means you don't have to pull your punches," and she winked.

At that Bismuth chuckled and Jasper had a hint of a smile to her features.

Continuing on, Peridot said, "If there are capabilities beyond that, we're unaware of them. The corruption has always withdrawn early into the encounter."

Bismuth nodded. "Got it. And the plan of attack?"

Jasper spoke up for this. "Connie keeps it from retreating. Steven protects Connie. Peridot, Lapis, and Wolf are support. Crowd control." Looking at each of the three in turn, the Quartz said, "Clear
out the minions, take attacks of opportunity against the corruption, but otherwise stay back. Anyone gets in trouble, you pull them clear."

Peridot nodded readily and Wolf barked in agreement but Lapis stuck out her tongue, saying something about spoiling all her fun.

"Bismuth and I are taking point. Any surprises this one has? Best we get hit than someone else," finished the warrior.

"Plus it means more fun for us," answered grinning Bismuth, one hand shifted into a large hammer.

The twinkle in Jasper's eyes was answer enough.

As planned, Connie and Steven mounted up on Wolfback. Lapis and Peridot were hovering overhead while Jasper and Bismuth fell back to the flanks. The group moved swiftly forward.

The wind was blowing, Wolf was panting happily as he bounded across the sand while, curiously, not leaving any paw prints in the sandy terrain. He was a mysterious animal.

Voice coming through clear as day despite the noise, Connie heard Steven whisper to her, "This is going to be awesome." She felt his hold around her waist tighten a little and he kissed the back of her head, adding, "You're going to be awesome."

Connie felt herself flush, smiling fit to make her cheeks ache. In a whisper that the communicator conveyed flawlessly to Steven's ear, she said, "We're both going to be awesome."

The sand plume drew swiftly closer, Wolf and the others capable of eating up the distance quickly. Connie felt Steven nod/nuzzle her in agreement. Then he said, with audible excitement in his voice, "I've been practicing my lines all morning."

Connie was tempted to say more in response, or at least faux-complain about her aching smile muscles, but the group had just cleared a low sand dune and the sand plume was right there. Banter would have to wait.

Ringed by low sand dunes and a craggy, sun-baked stone rise, the monster rested at the bottom of a bowl filled with a thin haze of sand that spiraled and whirled. The creature's body was buried but a long, shaggy neck probably as long as a truck emerged from the surrounding sand, ending in a large, eyeless face that looked more like a beaked mask made of horn or bone. A few smaller, vaguely translucent versions of the monster milled about nearby. It shifted position, the sand and rock running off its bulk like water --a surreal sight indeed-- as the rest of it was uncovered.
It was staring upward at the sand whirling overhead. It was Connie's job to change that.

Though Steven had offered to help.

There was a faint throat-clearing sound and then Steven's voice rang out clearly in the air in front of Connie. "Good morning!" said a cheery voice. Wolf's ears twitched and the masked head turned their way, proving that the communicator was set to mass broadcast mode.

The voice then became a little deeper and louder in what Steven called his 'announcer voice.' "Coming to you live from the Gobi desert, I present to you the Crystall Gemms! Peridot is here to school you and class is now in session! Lapis will quench your thirst... for combat! Wolf is a good boy who's all bark and all bite too! And then there's Bismuth and Jasper, the devastating duo, returning to their roles as Hammer and Anvil after a millennia-long retirement!"

This whole mission hinged on Connie reaching out to the target's mindscape, replacing fear with rage so it wouldn't retreat. But Colored Perception only worked when Connie was aware of the target and when the target was aware of Connie.

"But in the center ring is the electrifying lady of lightning, the sword-swinging superhero, the tour de force field, your favorite and mine, Connieee Maheswaraaaaan!"

Sword summoned and thrust skyward, Connie unleashed a triple arc of electricity and a shower of sparks (she'd been charging since they'd spotted the sand plume), followed by a loud cry of, "Face me if you dare!"

Colored Perception only worked when the target was aware of Connie. So Connie was making sure it couldn't, in any possible way, miss her.

Connie leapt from Wolf a heartbeat before the world was plunged into absolute silence. In her head she'd wanted to do a forward flip and then land dramatically. However, it turned out that momentum was conserved when she turned insubstantial: what would have been a single flip for a flesh-and-blood Connie became a duodecuple flip for a Connie made of magic and light, the world spinning around her in a blur twelve full times.

She landed gracelessly but harmlessly in sand as impenetrable as cement, her mind's eye already opening to the vista before her. She saw...
Take a completed psychedelic puzzle of earth tones and remove every other piece. Replace those with ones from a completely different puzzle of pastels, forcing the pieces to fit even when they shouldn't. It wasn't pure chaos, but rather two patterns overlaid atop one another, pieced together by a novice-puzzle solver who wasn't worried if some of the edges were jagged or if a few corner pieces were missing.

Then sprinkle it with C-weed and brush the whole thing with the sickly greenish tint of corruption.

The 'earthtones' parts looked vaguely familiar though in that moment Connie couldn't say why. Whatever the case, she had a mission hinging on her. Reaching out with her mental self, she grasped the parts of the farrago pattern her power told her were relevant and...

Chapter End Notes

The monster model was drawn by BurdenKing.

BurdenKing has a real knack for monster designs and I just love what he comes up with. To that end, here's a sketch of the monster that lets you see it side-on:

We'll see you soon when the rest of Episode 33 goes up!

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As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the Connie Swap Tumblr. Thanks for reading!
Before you jump to the other side of that cliffhanger, Pink Togther author and Connie Swap fan art laureate NeonJohn had the following hilarious, illustrated prediction for this chapter.

Over his communicator, which he called a scouter in his mind because it looked so much like the ones they used in the Dragon Ball Z cartoons, he heard some sounds of excitement and cheering from the Crystal Gems.

It seemed like they'd enjoyed their introductions and Connie's cool, superhero challenge to the monster-person.

By the time he'd climbed down from Wolf --he didn't trust himself to do a cool, Metroid spiny jump like Connie did-- and jogged over to stand beside Connie, the monster-person's long neck had pulled back, their mask-horn-face disappearing into the sand like a really weird, fuzzy submarine. The mini-monsters just kind of popped like soap bubbles, which was really weird.

Steven blinked but stood in front of Connie, his shield arm raised just in case.

"Did Alloy let it retreat?" asked Bismuth, the smith easily heard over Steven's scouter even though she was probably forty feet ahead.

"The seismic data profile matches that of previous withdraws," said Miss Peridot from where she was helicoptering overhead.

"What?" replied Bismuth.
"I said-" started Peridot when Steven broadcast to everyone, "Miss Peridot says the seismic data looks like it's retreating."

"Thanks Meatball," // "That is broadly correct. Thank you," answered Bismuth and Miss Peridot at the same time.

"Guess it doesn't appreciate a showy entrance," joked Miss Lapis, who was also circling around, wings out.

Jasper was about fifteen feet from where the monster-person had been, looking kind of like Lion did when he was about to pounce on something. Wolf was close by, his ears moving like big radar dishes as he looked alert.

Steven was about to say something back to Lapis when there was a rumble and then a big spray of sand and rocks. Steven made his shield as big as it could get and angled it up to protect him and Connie.

There was a loud, deep growl that reminded Steven of some of Jenny Pizza's metal music. And like Jenny's metal music, the growl just kind of kept going. Didn't gems run out of air when talking? Was it different for corrupted gem people? His scouter ear was fine since it did some kind of noise cancelling thing, but his other ear was wishing Jenny would turn the volume down some.

A glanced showed that Connie was fine. She was standing up, see-through and with that million-mile stare she got when she was doing her mindscape magic.

With the inertial dampener on, even the bigger rocks bonked off the shield without pushing Steven around. The debris cloud finally clearing out, Steven saw the monster-person climbing out of the sand while a new group of those little, kinda-see-through versions of it ran ahead. It was a really big monster-person, probably as long as the school bus that drove him home from school, with long bird feet and bird... arms? That didn't sound right but it's what they were.

"Nevermind," drawled Miss Lapis.

Bismuth cheered and ran down the dune toward the monster-person while Jasper clobbered one of the monster mini-me's. The Quartz muttered something about owlbears while she fought.

"Lapis! Cover the eastern quadrant while I screen the western," shouted Miss Peridot as she landed on top of a dune, reconfiguring her enhancer to be like Mega Man's blaster.

"Huh?! Sorry, Dot, but I can't hear diddily nor squat with that thing gargling gravel," answered Lapis, swooping down and whomping a minion with her hammer.

Steven toggled his scouter off general broadcast mode. "Peridot says to cover the eastern part of the fight while she gets the west."

"Ah, got it. Thanks Pinkie. Divebomb!" cried the blue gem as she flew into position and dove after another little monster.

Three of the little monsters ran toward Steven. They weren't any bigger than a big dog, but their legs and necks were really long so they had a lot of reach. One got picked off by precision plasma fire before the other two made contact. Steven planted his shield and blocked the both of them, ducking to avoid a peck around the edge of the field. It scratched off the back of his armor instead of hitting anything squishy. Bracing his shoulder against the field, he toggled off the dampener and shoved, knocking both of them flat.
One ate a green blast of plasma and the other ate… getting eaten, Wolf pouncing on it and shaking it until it vanished in a little puff.

"Thanks!" cheered Steven, receiving a nasally 'Certainly' and a bark in response. Meanwhile, the air was gritty with sand and loud with a sound like two bass drums arguing.

"I'll take a hit, you go for the flank," Steven heard in Jasper's commanding voice. Below, the orange gem was skirmishing with the large bird-bear-monster-person, dodging a large claw swipe. Bismuth hopped up, swiping at the mask-face, her arm long and sharp. The neck swung back around, bowling Bismuth over, though she popped back up an instant later, grinning. "You say something, Jaz?"

Steven made sure he was shielding the magically distracted Connie while he relayed messages between Jasper and Bismuth. He smiled. It was like passing notes in class, but not going to make the teacher angry.

Jasper jumped in front of the monster-person and started to hammer them with punches. A big claw struck her, but she just shrugged it off and continued her assault. Meanwhile, Bismuth had shifted her arms into long metal hooks, then jogged back a ways to give her room for a running start.

The air was awash with the sound of growling and, faintly, of combat.

Right as Bismuth was sprinting for the monster-person's flank, the big mask-beak jabbed downward straight at Jasper. The warrior reached up to catch the blow, which she did, but suddenly the sand beneath her turned really churny and she was shoved straight down and out of sight by the big beak.

Bismuth, without realizing what had happened, leapt, landed on the monster-person's side, then used her hook arms to climb right up. One arm became a kind of curved sword and she sliced anything she could reach. When the big mask-face whipped around to knock her off its back, she managed to reach out and snag it with her hook arm instead, getting whipped around wildly. She sounded like she was having fun.

A glimpse of orange was visible in the churny sand before sinking back down out of sight.

"Lapis! cried Steven into his scouter. "Jasper is in quicksand or something!"

"Wha- Oh! Hang on, OJ! I'mma fish you out!"

A big blob of water appeared as Lapis emptied her canteens, then shot down and disappeared into the sand. A beat later and a watery sand blob popped up then was dropped on another sand dune, turning into very wet, sandy Jasper. When the water flew back into the air, it was just a very sandy Jasper, the Quartz already leaping forward to help Bismuth ride-fight the big monster-person.

Peridot took to the air, finding the melee below interfering with her shots and, Steven guessed, because she wanted to be closer to Lapis in case the distracted gem got attacked.

Another wave of minions ran out. Steven was braced for the charge, which was good because suddenly the ground under them exploded, pillars of rock shooting up and sending them flying. One hit the force field shield going super fast, poofing on impact, Steven feeling the shock in his arms and knees even through the inertial dampener.

There was a snarl and he saw Wolf tussling with two of them and a scream overhead showed
Peridot dropping like a rock, her propeller hand turned off so that the mini-monster-missile missed her.

Just as Wolf rolled over, his bulk crushing one and stunning another monster, Steven shouted, "Wolf! Save Miss Peridot!"

Peridot had turned her helicopter arm back on but it didn't look like she'd stop falling before she hit the ground. Shaking his large head, Wolf spotted the green gem and howled, the sound briefly loud enough to drowned out the ongoing rumble-growl.

Steven ran over and finished off the stunned monster with his heavy boots, the chance of him ever getting to take sandals on a mission shrinking even further. Maybe if there were combat sandals. Was that a thing?

Peridot fell into the swirling vortex that had opened up in the sand where she would have crashed, the gem shooting out of another portal a little ways away. The technician was upside down and looked totally confused, but she was able to turn her helicopter arm the right way and get back in the air.

Now you're thinking with Wolf-portals! Steven inwardly cheered.

A wave of rock and sand washed over the big monster-person down in the bowl, spraying Jasper and Bismuth off their opponent and half burying them in rubble.

"Lapis! Peridot! Shoot or water-blob the monster. I think Jasper and Bismuth need the help!" shouted the teen into his scouter.

Peridot landed, an arc of electricity zapping the monster's long neck. It swiveled around, lunged forward, and pecked at her, the super long neck giving it really long reach. Peridot yelped and fell backwards, but a medicine ball-sized water fist uppercut the mask-face, knocking its beak skyward and missing Peridot entirely.

Steven could hear Miss Lapis cackling over his scouter.

Then the sand in the bowl rose up and began swirling around. The water fist got all sandy and then exploded when a big rock punched up out of the ground and smashed into it. Wet sand went flying everywhere while Lapis yelled, "Heyyy!"

Lapis was able to pull a fist-sized blob of water up out of a swath of wet sand before another sand wave swept across the bowl, burying the wet sand. The dunes became really churny for a second, Steven having to struggle to keep his footing. Judging from Lapis', "Oh, that's just fighting dirty!" whatever had happened meant that water wasn't coming back.

Jasper and Bismuth had unburied themselves and charged back in. Another wave of mini-monsters poured out and Steven readied himself, using his free hand to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Bismuth! Look out! There's more quicksand!" he barked into his scouter.

This... this might take a while.

Steven wiped his brow, panting, his mouth dry and gritty. The world was exhaustion and super-sized death growling.

There was a tap on Steven's shoulder. Well, more of a knock given his armor.
He swiveled around to see Connie standing there, completely not see-through. "Bleh?" was his highly intelligent response.

Connie started to reach forward to cup Steven's face when she paused. A force field appeared in place to intercept some flying debris. Then she turned back to Steven, guiding his forehead to her own. There was a glow and then Steven felt everything get... better.

He blinked away the yellow spots in his vision and smiled, suddenly feeling light on his feet. Also, the scratchiness around his eyes and nose was gone and one of his shoulders felt better. When had that gotten hurt?

Connie sagged, reaching up to rub her scratchy eyes and nose. One of her shoulders drooped a little. She gave him a wan smile and then went see-through, soon standing a little straighter.

"Woohoo! Recharge!" crowed Steven, swiveling around to bat a minion aside for Lapis to hammer-pound into dust.

"What?" said the four gems he'd accidentally broadcast that to.

Motion caught Steven's eye as he jogged back to Connie. She was signing at him.

"[I don't think we're winning,]" signed Connie, his ghostly girlfriend looking out across the battlefield.

"[It's pretty crazy out there,]" agreed Steven, signing as swiftly as he could with the shield on his arm.

"[I have an idea but it's going to get even crazier.]")

Steven's eyebrows went up at that.

"[I've only been making half of the monster angry at once.]")

Steven didn't understand how only half a monster-person could be mad, but he didn't interrupt by asking.

"[That keeps it from retreating.]") continued see-through Connie, "[but I think it's also not angry enough to really make mistakes. So I'm going to make it all-the-way angry. But, uh, warn the others, please.]")

Steven nodded and did as she asked, the super-growl as loud as it'd been since the start. Apparently monster-people didn't need to pause for breath. That or it was like the Death Metal-equivalent of purring.

"Ready," answered Jasper.

"Bring it!" bellowed Bismuth.

"Affirmative," replied Peridot.

"If you say so, Stevie," muttered Lapis.

Wolf barked.

A moment later there was a deafening silence, the growl gone, the monster-person vanishing down
into the rubble. Jasper hung on for a while, still pummeling the long neck and mask with her helmet until forced off by the debris; the monster-person did look pretty roughed up before vanishing into the ground.

Peridot, who had landed so she could shoot, took off and began to circle while Miss Lapis hovered in place.

Everything was still for another few seconds other than the clatter of loose stones shifting and bits of sand settling.

Then the desert kind of exploded and everything got really confusing.

First, the air got super thick with sand, so much Steven had to pull the neck of his shirt up over his nose so he could breathe without coughing. It looked like Miss Lapis was having a hard time getting her water wings to work with that much sand in the air, Steven having to toggle his scouter away from her because that was not language suitable for fifteen-year-olds.

Right as that was happening there was a reverse avalanche, a carpet of rocks rising up out of the dunes and smashing into Bismuth and Jasper. Both tried and failed to swim against the current, being swept over the bowl of the valley and vanishing beyond.

Miss Peridot was in the process of landing somewhere that wasn't cuckoo, her main limb enhancer switching to tractor beam-mode, when the desert exploded, the angry metal growl back and angrier than ever, the monster-person flying out of the ground like the world's weirdest rocket.

Right into Miss Lapis.

Wolf did that super-bark of his, which smashed the monster-person's face mask aside, which meant Lapis was punted through the air like the birdie in a game of badminton instead of crushed into a sand dune under a bus-sized bird-bear-person.

Steven was able to toggle his scouter in time to hear a second of Lapis' "Aaaah!" before she cut out from being flung too far away.

The monster-person hit the dune, stone and sand moving like water as it swiftly vanished back underground. As soon as it vanished into the terrain, the noise vanished with it.

"Steven! I'm unable to perceive the others' position or condition through this haze!" shouted a really worried Miss Peridot. "Are you able to- GAH!"

Just as it burst out again, this time shooting at Peridot, a huge wave of sand washed through. Steven jumped up as high as he could, shield held overhead, and toggled his inertial dampener so that his fall back down was slowed waayy down; he kind of floated down an inch at a time like Princess Peach, though it was really uncomfortable on his arm and shoulder. Connie, still insubstantial, bobbed on the surface of the wave without being moved, but Wolf was swept off his paws and carried down into the bowl.

Miss Peridot pulled a basketball-sized rock into herself, fast, with her tractor beam, which probably hurt but it shoved her out of the way of the digging monster-person in time to not get smooshed.

The sand wave swirled around and around, turning the center of the bowl into a kind of sandy whirlpool, or one of those antlion traps but waayy bigger. Another crash and burrowing later and a long neck emerged from the base of the sandpool, the noise coming back with it.

Wolf, suspended in a green glow, was hauled out of the sand before he could get monster-pecked.
A moment later and Jasper spindashed into the pit and began to grapple with the monster, but a few seconds later a spray of rocks power-washed her off. Bismuth half-swam through the sand, her arms big scoop-type things and it got pretty chaotic in the sand trap below.

A force field appeared under Steven's feet and he was grateful to stop hanging by his shield arm as he drifted slowly closer to the swirling sands beneath him. Connie, solid, hung on the side of the field, teeth gritted as she tried to resist getting swept away.

"Gah!" Steven hustled over and hauled her up onto the field.

Two more force fields winked into existence, saving Wolf and Peridot from getting sarlacc'd. Jasper and Bismuth continued to fight, but half the time they were buried under swirling terrain, and the other they were fist-fighting a doom chicken.

Peridot shouted at Steven, audible only because of his gemtech, asking after Lapis again. Steven relayed what he could, unsure how the blue gem was or when she'd be back.

There was a glow of yellow and then a sword appeared, the air crackling in a way you felt because you sure couldn't hear anything. Connie reared back and then chucked her sword, then had to summon a force field to intercept the missile before a wave of sand washed Bismuth into the blade's path.

Field and sword exploded in a shower of yellow magic and sparks, the impact only a few feet away from a startled looking Miss Bismuth.

Connie swooned a little, a combination of exhaustion and force field drunkenness getting to her. "We need to try something new," mumbled the girl as Steven supported her.

"You're wiped out," said Steven, having to broadcast over his scouter to be heard despite Connie being literally at arm's-length. "I'm not sure you can keep fighting."

She had given him two recharges mid-fight and it looked like doing that CP thing had wore out her magic even if it helped her body get better. "I can," she mumbled, brown eyes looking up at him where she slumped against him for support. "With you."

Things were cuckoo-bananas down below. Steven tried to help coordinate but Peridot and Wolf were fighting just to not get swallowed in the sand and Jasper and Bismuth were fighting the ground more than they were fighting the monster-person in the ground.

Steven nodded absently, trying to swallow and having to spit out a bunch of grit as he did. "Okay. Whatever it takes, right?"

"Dest'ny partners," mumbled a weary Connie.

"Destiny partners," agreed Steven.

Because Miss Peridot was completely awesome, Steven's scouter could play music. And of course he had their song uploaded to it. He remembered to toggle it so only he and Connie could hear it because he figured Jasper and the others had enough to be mad about right now.

Steven swept Connie into his arms. She smiled up at him, he smiled down at her, and he spun the two of them on their force field dance floor. They must've been getting good at this fusion thing because just a few beats later there was a bright, yellow glow and...
There was a brief giggle as Asmi stood there, followed by a swoon. A horizontal force field appeared for them to lean against. "Whoa, right, still half-tired and all dizzy from spinning."

Looking themself over they saw Steven's armor had become a breastplate, greaves, and armored boots around cargo shorts and a shirt. Not as protective as Steven's outfit, but after the battle's exertion, it felt muuuch cooler. Asmi breathed a sigh of relief and then chuckled, realizing Steven's halfplate had become quarterplate.

A plan blossomed across their thoughts. Already they felt their hair frizzing and their clothes static clinging.

They summoned another horizontal force field, closer to the maelstrom at the center and a little higher up. They clambered up, struggling a little because they still felt uncoordinated. Their left shoulder ached and their right leg was wobbly and one nostril and one eye were all scratchy. Plus, fused or not, Connie had five fields occupying her thoughts. "Come on, me," Asmi admonished. "I should be the best at supporting myself. I just need to find a way to balance things a little better."

They shut their eyes and thought, crouching to clutch the field below them for stability against the whipping sand swirling through the air. Connie couldn't touch her forehead to herself, of course, and Steven didn't have a transference power of his own, but right now the line between Connie and Steven was a blurred as it could get. Asmi was simultaneously one person and two; if they could exploit that duality to have the best of both worlds, they would do that in a heartbeat. It would be like an ultimate combo move or reserve of untapped, mystical potential.

Their gemstone glowed and Asmi felt the aches of their body blur like chocolate stirred into milk.

They opened their eyes and smiled. "I knew I could do it," feeling a lot more stable on their feet. "Now, how to handle these force fields?" There was a gust and Asmi summoned a vertical field to catch themself.

Outwardly, Asmi didn't move, but inwardly, thoughts and images were flashing by. "I think," they said in a deeper voice than usual, "that we have to be more Steven-and-Connie than normal for this."

A gritty gust blew Asmi's hair about wildly, the fusion crouching a little lower for shelter. They nodded. "Okay Steven. If it'll help me get a few things off my mind, I'm all for it," they said in a higher voice, smirking slightly.

Eyes closing again, they mentally envisioned Connie and Steven floating in a featureless void. Connie had six yellow Post-It notes scattered across her features: one stuck to each cheek, one on her chin, one on her nose, one in the middle of her forehead, even one covering her left eye. The notes were numbered one through six. The visualized Connie plucked the '6' Post-It from the bridge of her nose and handed it to Steven. It slipped through his fingers, vanishing into nothingness right after.

The vertical field Asmi was leaning against immediately winked out.

They frowned. "I guess I can't help you," they said in a low, sad voice. Sparks were dancing across their scowl when they blinked in surprise.

The maelstrom was growing more intense. Another field appeared that they braced against. Mentally 'Steven' took the note, which vanished from his fingers at the same instant the field disappeared.
Asmi nearly toppled over before using the inertial dampener of the shield on their arm to keep them stable. They laughed.

No, they cackled. Because this was going to be awesome!

Wolf and Peridot were using two fields. Asmi was standing on one as well. Those stayed, but the other two winked out.

A weight fell from Asmi’s mind, the world seeming to snap into greater clarity as they were better able to interpret it. Their hair, buffeted by wind and grit, frizzled and sparked even as the fusion alternately laughed deeply and gave a high giggle-snort.

Asmi leapt forward, the field vanishing behind them and a new one appearing under their armored feet as soon as they reached the apex of their jump. Still running, they reached the edge of the field and leapt again, making a mid-air twist to avoid a piece of flying debris. A field appeared to receive them right as the one behind vanished.

In the maelstrom below, a flash of rainbow caught their eye. Two fields appeared, one to act as a dam, diverting some of the sandy whirlpool away from the smith while the other was there for her to grab on to.

Spitting out sand and wiping her face free, Bismuth looked up. Given the omnipresent rumble, she was only audible because of the scouter that fit snugly over one of Asmi’s ears. "Thanks." She spat several small stones out of her mouth. "Good to see you again."

Asmi winked, a few errant sparks cascading down with the gesture. "If you can climb a little higher, I think Peridot can tractor beam you clear."

Toggling the scouter, they said, "Bismuth is coming up. Use your beam to get her out of there, Miss ma'am." They blinked at the jumbled end of the message. A symptom of being partially synched, probably.

Peridot was an indistinct green silhouette through the swirling air, but Asmi could hear clearly the gem's stammered response. "I- Who- Have you-!"

"No time!" they shouted back, a statement emphasized by having to dive sideways to avoid a stabbing beak like the prow of a ramming ship.


Asmi hung, suspended in the air, dangling by their upraised shield, the inertial dampener turning the acceleration of gravity into a slow descent. With a second's respite they unsummoned the fields from their frenzied escape. Then a shadow in the haze resolved into another beak of doom. With a yelp and swift pair of toggles of the dampener, they plummeted below the attack and then stopped with a jerk.

Ow, that really was hard on the arm and shoulder.

They heard Bismuth and Peridot shout-talking to each other over their scouter, something that was only possible if the gems were right next to each other. They unsummoned the two fields used to fish the smith out of the whirlpool.

They felt themselves thrumming with energy, sparks crackling at the tips of their fingers and toes.

"Need to get higher," they muttered to themself.
They summoned a field under them, grateful to have the weight off their shield arm, ducked under a flying rock, then kicked out, the field vanishing the second their foot broke contact.

Steven had once watched a Jackie Chan movie where the martial artist had ran up the corner of an alley by half-jumping, half-kicking from wall to wall. A combination of that and Steven’s hours spent mastering the fiddly wall jump move in the *Metroid* games were going through Asmi’s mind as they summoned opposing fields and sprinted *up* them. These vanished and were replaced by higher ones as soon as they ran out of ‘corner’ to ascend.

Crouching on a horizontal field, Asmi caught their breath, the whirling sand much thinner up thirty or forty feet above the desert floor. Each exhalation released a shower of short-lived sparks. "Pilot to bombardier," quipped the fusion in a deeper voice.

"Bombardier here," they answered a little higher, smiling if still winded and panting. "Do we have a firing solution?"

There was a shadow of movement below, a long neck roving into view, probably searching for them.

"Firing solution acquired." They knocked on their armored chest, the air crackling with electricity as they did. "Really glad we've got this quarter plate."

They nodded in reply. The field vanished and was replaced with one that was angled steeply down like the drop on a roller coaster. Legs straight, arms crossed over their chest like they told you to do going down the *really big* water slides in water parks, Asmi plummeted, breastplate and greaves leaving a brilliant trail of sparks where they contacted the force field.

Another field was added, then a third, the fusion running out of 'slide' with alarming speed. A trunk-like neck swiveled around to gaze up at them, attracted either by the light show or the "Woowoow!" Asmi slalomed between the middle and left horn of the mask-beak, their sliding surface becoming suddenly shaggy.

Asmi, feeling like they had just attempted the gallon challenge with bottled lightning, whipped around and grabbed the furry trunk. They grabbed, ignoring the rug burn, and they unleashed... *everything.*

It was loud. And bright. Then it got louder and brighter. It was possible their eyebrows were on fire, but they weren't sure. They were riding the world's largest, shaggiest bull but also falling but also being blown around by a sand tornado. Then their ride exploded and sand was falling from the sky and they were falling from the sky and bursts of inertial dampener meant their shoulder was *really* unhappy with them but when they landed it was only mostly painful.

The rumble was gone so everything sounded really loud. They were laughing and it hurt to laugh so it came out more like a coughing fit that ended with a giggle-snort.

A large, wet nose nuzzled them and a big, wet tongue slopped across their cheek. Asmi groan-laughed. "Wo~ooo~olf!" Wiping the sand from their face, Asmi tried to rise and stumbled, gemstone glowing yellow while they passed some hurt around to make that easier.

It helped that they probably had more adrenaline than blood in their system just then.

With a little lupine assistance, Asmi rose to their feet. Their surroundings were still hazy, but the lingering sand in the air was settling down. Large doggy eyes looked up at the fusion, who gave the hound a scratch under the chin. "Good boy," they said, removing the scouter and shaking it out
to a shower of particles.

Wolf panted and then pawed at something in the sand. The thing caught the dim light and sparkled.

"The gem!" they said, crouching. Yeah, crouching kind of hurt. Pocketing the scouter and lifting the gem up, they frowned. That looked really weird.

One time a much younger Connie had broken a plate. It had been her favorite plate because her daddy had won it for her at the arcade during a visit and it was the one she always insisted she eat her daily apple slices off of. Unwilling to throw it away, she’d tried to gather up each and every fragment to meticulously glue them all back together.

The finished product had been roughly plate-shaped but there’d been extra pieces that she didn't know where they went and other pieces were missing and the whole thing was simultaneously sticky and sharp. This gemstone looked kind of like that, except it wasn't one plate but two: one a pearlescent white, the other a mottled brown, each enmeshed with the other.

A yellow bubble engulfed the curious gemstone. Gemstones?

Cool. I can make bubbles, a corner of Asmi observed, just one more neat thing to ponder later.

Wolf padded off, snuffling the sand, searching. At the same time there was a helicoptering noise.

"Connie! Steven! Are you-"

Peridot landed nearby, eyes wide. "Asmi," she said her voice a mix of emotions. Then she took in the fusion's condition and she yelped. "Gah! Field examination! Now! Arms out, palms open!" The scan began before Asmi could even get their arms raised, the sweep of green like looking solid in the hazy air.

A dozen feet away Wolf was digging, sand flying, the hound buried up to his shoulder in the excavation.

"I think I'll-" but Asmi's statement was cut off by an angry 'not okay' buzz and red light from the limb enhancer.

"Widespread first-degree burns! A few localized second-degree burns! Abrasions over thirty percent of your body, incipient bruising, and your shoulder shows severe signs of strain!" objected the green gem as she read off a holographic display.

Bismuth, eyes sparkling, jogged over. "That was one heck of a show, Allo- I mean, Asmi." The smith patted Asmi on the shoulder. This brought a pained hiss from the fusion, an angry shout from Peridot, and a hasty, "Whoops, sorry," from a visibly chagrined Bismuth.

Wolf backpedaled out of the burrow just as there was a spray of sand and stone below, a familiar, deep grunt issuing from within.

Asmi's eyebrows shot up. "Um, hold that thought," they said as they turned toward the noise. They paused and passed the bubble over to Peridot, adding, "Hold this too. It's really weird."

Then, beginning to feel the aforementioned owies more as they came down from their victory rush, Asmi jogged over to where Jasper was clawing her way free from being buried by a combination rock and sand manipulator.

The Quartz paused in her climb out when she noticed the quarter-gem in quarterplate waiting for her. Asmi summoned a pair of fields into position as holds to make the warrior's ascent easier.
Wordlessly, Jasper gripped the yellow holds and climbed out. The fields immediately vanished, causing the Quartz to raise a single eyebrow in surprise. She glanced over at where Bismuth was grinning and Peridot was gawking at something inside a yellow bubble.

"You poofed it?" she asked.

Asmi nodded. In the distance Bismuth cupped her hands to her mouth and shouted, "I’m pretty sure not even Selenite could have delivered a shock like that."

The Quartz’ other eyebrow rose at that.

It hurt a little to grin but not grinning just wasn’t an option for Asmi right then. "You impressed now?" they asked, extending a hand.

Jasper stared at the outstretched arm, then glanced over toward Peridot and Bismuth. The former was muttering something about reassembled gem shards and forced connections. The latter chuckled and said, "You have to ask? I was fine with them from the start!"

Turning back to Asmi, the warrior gave a curt nod, grasping the outstretched hand. Gently.

It still kind of hurt, though Asmi covered for it by shooting Jasper a finger gun and smiling wider.

A moment later the sky overhead grew dark, the light casting strange patterns across the ground.

Everyone looked up, where the blue of the sky had been replaced with the blue of a very large body of water.

Lapis hovered down, a fierce scowl on her face. "I’m back! Where'd that sand-slinging piece of schist get..."

She beheld the Quartz-fusion handshake. "I missed a thing or two, didn't I?"

Chapter End Notes
The in-chapter art was drawn by BurdenKing.

I like how it closes the circle that started with this image of BurdenKing's:

If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

Connie Swap has an official Discord for the fans. Come check it out.

As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the Connie Swap Tumblr. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

Just a parting message from br42 to the many fine people who leave comments here in Connie Swap. Ep33 being as long as it is, going so long between off-weeks, means the AO3 comments have managed to stack up and I just haven't been able to reply to all of them. Not while keeping to our release schedule.

But having a bounty of reader feedback to reply to is the best kind of busy to be; rest assured I'll catch back up on all of it, old and new, in the next week or two. And, as ever, thanks for reading and thanks doubly for commenting! It means the world to me and my co-creators.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Asmi laid down on one of the big, colorful pillows at the base of Citrine's statue. It was cold in the sanctuary, but Bismuth had grabbed some thick blankets from the Beach House along the way (Wolf had stayed to save them from an overabundance of kibble). Heavily ensconced in layers of fluffy polyester, Asmi tried to reach out with that indescribable sense that accompanied Connie's colored perception ability.

There was a 'pop' and the blankets deflated a little as a bewildered-looking, scuffed up, transparent Connie was squeezed out of the blanket pile and onto the larger pillow. Beside her a very tangible and also scuffed up Steven gave a long, low groan of, "Ooowwie..."

Two long minutes later, Connie signing anxiously while Steven mostly curled up in a big, fluffy ball, Connie returned to normal. Hissing from the sudden return of sensation (and hence pain), she scooted over and swiftly touched her forehead to Steven's. There was a radiant yellow glow between them.

Connie's pained "Ooow-" was cut off when the girl swiftly went insubstantial.

Steven, meanwhile, felt around his arms and cheeks, then rolled his shoulders, seemingly surprised by the lack of 'DON'T DO THAT' signals from his body.

The insubstantial and very roughed up girl sitting on a pillow signed to Steven, her see-through gemstone glowing a soft yellow.

Turning to the four gems in the room, the boy said, "She says she doesn't feel hurt anymore." He then stood up in the chilly sanctuary air to submit himself to a field examination by Peridot. A few seconds later and the limb enhancer dinged, the hologram popping up with a green 'a-okay' checkmark.

Lapis skipped over and gave Steven a firm hug. "Glad we didn't break you, Pinkie."

"Yeah," agreed Steven, wrapping himself back up in blankets. "Me too." He turned and signed to Connie, who signed something back, visibly relieved.

Jasper gave a nod as well, then thrust an arm forward, a yellow bubble hovering over her
outstretched palm. "What is this gem?" asked the Quartz.

Lapis and Bismuth closed in, squinting at it, the former saying, "That's a Biggs in there and I'm pretty sure the other one is a Pearl." Lapis shook her head, straightening up. "Have I mentioned that I'm tired of fighting Pearls, because I'm tired of fighting Pearls. No more Pearls. I'm even willing to give up on pearl onions if it'll help."

Bismuth continued to stare. "I'm no Kindergartner, but I know that's not how a Biggs or a Pearl are supposed to be."

Steven, meanwhile, watched and listened, his hands free from the blankets enough to sign the conversation to Connie, who was already starting to look a little less banged up than before.

"You're quite right," said Peridot, beckoning the bubble over to her. "And speaking as a certified Kindergartner, I can say with authority that this is anything but typical. Or natural. What we are witnessing was two gems shattered, their shards reassembled into a sloppy approximation of their pre-shattered state, and their ersatz gemstones forced into fusion."

"Like the grafted gem shards from the Prime Kindergarten?" asked Jasper.

Peridot nodded. "Yes, if on a much grander scale."

Bismuth cocked her head to the side. "When was that again?"

"January," answered the technician without looking away from the sphere.

Steven blinked, then continued signing for Connie's benefit as he spoke. "Wait, when did the doom chicken first show up again?"

"Ha! Doom chicken!" barked Lapis.

"It was in late-" Peridot paused, data streaming across the inside of her glasses. "-January," she finished, saying the word in a perplexed tone.

Connie was signing. "Uh, Connie says, 'Did we unleash something at the Kindergarten when we made it friendly for life again?'"

You could worry in the sanctuary but only on an intellectual level. Peridot looked like she had plenty of that, with a measure of uncertainty added. "I- There's a correlation at work, though we don't yet know which direction the causal chain goes." She frowned. "Yet another anomaly to investigate at that Kindergarten."

"Forcing shards back together? Forcing fusion?" Bismuth looked around the room. "That's them, right?"

Lapis nodded her head. "Oh yeah. Eleventy hundred percent this was Homeworld doing... something." Her pigtails bobbed in a headshake. "But I've got no flippin' idea why. Homeworld hated different gem types fusing, period, and with the way they were shattering people, you'd think the Diamonds couldn't get out of bed in the morning without a big bowl of Shardy Pebbles waiting for them." She flitted over and peered at the bubble. "Why shatter gems if you're just going to stick 'em back together?"

"Pink Diamond," said Jasper, her eyes soon drifting up to the towering statue of Citrine.

Bismuth was shifting each hand into a hammer and back, one at a time, left then right. "Practicing
to try and bring their shattered Diamond back." She nodded absently. "Yeah, that sounds load-bearing."

Lapis looked to Peridot. "Would that even work? It's not like a shattered gem is just a jigsaw puzzle?"

Peridot opened her mouth, then closed it, her thoughts racing ahead of her words. Finally she said, "There is no known way to restore a shattered gem to their pre-shattered condition. A gem brought to within a micron of shattering can still be restored with fountain water or healing lacrimal essence, but once shattered the consciousness is fragmented and the shards are treated as individual, if incomplete, gems; healed shards will remain shards."

The technician shifted her weight and raised a hand-equivalent didactically. "If this is as Jasper posits it to be -- an attempt at an alternate means of restoring a shattered gem -- then the results would be..." She huffed a breath, turning to begin pacing, the bubble remaining with Lapis. "You would have dozens or hundreds of incomplete, individual gems attempting to behave as a unified whole. But the coordination could never be as perfect as a gem who was not shattered in the first place. And not just physical coordination: memory sharing and information processing would be similarly stymied, therefore..." She trailed off.

"Them but not," offered Jasper.

"Concisely put," answered Peridot, adding, "And likely unsettling in appearance and mannerisms both. I suspect that would have been readily apparent if the Biggs-Pearl fusion hadn’t also been corrupted."

Perhaps from the morbid idea hanging over the group, conversation among the six dried up, no one moving save for Peridot's pacing and Bismuth's shapeshifting game. Lapis tapped the bubble, sending it to the burning room.

Finally Connie, looking better if not yet well, signed something to Steven. Steven blinked, signed something back, then motioned Lapis over and whispered something in her ear.

This prompted the blue gem to snicker and shoot Connie a wink. She then skipped over to the middle of the group and said, "Alright, gals. Huddle up. Important Crystal Gem business is afoot."

The four closed ranks, deliberating. Lapis and/or Bismuth descended into chuckling several times during the talk. Long minutes later the huddle broke up.

Peridot cleared her throat. "In light of recent events, the group consensus has shifted such that we are willing to lift the probation on hybrid-human fusion."

Steven jolted within his pile of blankets, eyes wide and hopeful. "You mean..."

Connie, see-through still, looked at his expression and then matched it with one of her own.

Bismuth smiled. "Fuse it up, you two," and she shot the pair a wink.

"You will." Peridot quickly interjected, "-present yourselves for regular scans as a consequence. The long-term effects of fusion on organics are unknown and if this practice is to continue, it will be with proper supervision or not at all."

She stepped forward and fixed Steven with a sharp look. "Is that understood?"

Steven's eyes went wide then he nodded quickly.
Peridot then gave Connie a pointed look as well while Steven signed to the girl. Connie was soon nodding vigorously in agreement.

Satisfied, Peridot retreated a few paces and said, "As a consequence of the fusion prohibition being lifted, the justification for Connie's disciplinary restrictions is likewise negated."

"Connie's not grounded anymore?!” gasped Steven.

"That is correct," answered Peridot.

Steven signed to Connie, Connie signed excitedly back, then the both of them leaping up from their seats -- Steven having a harder time of it with the blankets and his pillow not supporting him like a concrete slab.

Finally boyfriend and immaterial girlfriend pulled back for a high five. At the moment when their hands would have impacted, Connie stopped herself and a vertical force field sprang into being between them, Steven's hand offering a resounding *clap* that echoed through the domed building.

Bismuth leaned over to Jasper, saying in what passed for a whisper for the smith, "That was pretty slick."

Jasper, a hint of a smile on her face, agreed with a curt nod.

Everyone warped home to find Wolf napping on the couch and eight robonoids perched in different spots around the Beach House, all staring at them. Robinson was visible through the window seat window, peering inside as well.

In a stage whisper, Lapis said to the now-healed Connie, "I've had nightmares like this."

Peridot's limb enhancer chimed and data streamed across the inside of the gem's glasses.

Everyone shuffled off the warp pad and felt various degrees of relief when it became clear the many cold, electronic eyes were trained on Peridot specifically.

A long second passed before Peridot squawked. "What?!"

"I believe I can answer that question," said a serious voice. Six heads turned to see Ronaldo stepping out from the bathroom.

At the appearance of the unexpected Fryman, expressions ranged from wide-eyed shock to narrow-eyed suspicion with a few stops at bemused stares along the way. Wolf sleepily raised his head to watch from the couch.

Lapis crossed her arms, unamused. "Have you been hiding in our bathroom so you could make a dramatic entrance?"

Ronaldo looked suddenly uncertain. He started to open his mouth to object.

The blue gem preempted him, saying in a dry tone, "Before you say anything, know that every other possibility is actually worse."

Ronaldo was frozen with indecision for a long second before he cleared his throat. Addressing Peridot, he said, "Lesser matters aside, your spheritors are behaving thusly because they have had their mechanical minds opened to the Truth."
"How does he say that with capital letters?" whispered Bismuth.

"I want to know who let him in," added Lapis, who then swept her eyes across the gathered robonoids with a suspicious expression.

"I'm reviewing these submissions of theirs and-" Peridot summoned a holographic display, then enlarged it and swung it around to face Ronaldo. There was a large, green sphere visible, resting in what looked like someone's vegetable patch, an old woman in a kimono swatting it with a rake. "How did you create this image forgery of an intact plug robonoid?"

Ronaldo raised his chin in what was probably supposed to be a commanding look. "That's no forgery. A fellow truth-seeker living on Hokkaido island, Japan sent me that photograph. You can actually see her in the greater spheritor's reflection holding up her phone."

The holographic image zoomed in, then zoomed in again. Sure enough, you could make out the reflection of a college-age woman, upraised phone covering half her face, image distorted like a funhouse mirror by the spherical surface.

Lapis and Bismuth turned to Peridot, their eyes questioning. Jasper's eyes never left the intruder.

Peridot, brought up another hologram, scrolling through a list of data. "Hokkaido? But- That plug robonoid broke up during entry. Unless..." More holograms, some of which showed what looked like weather data, others showing orbital lines. "There was a meteor shower over that region during the robonoid bombardment. It's possible my sensor network was confused by the breakup of a meteor in the atmosphere, erroneously flagging the plug robonoid as destroyed." She peered owlishly around her nest of holograms. "Though this false-negative represents the confluence of extremely unlikely events and is, as such, a statistical outlier," she finished, her tone defensive.

"It's weird," answered Ronaldo, saying the word with relish. "My truth-seekers scour this hollow Earth for weirdness to discover the Truth before it can be ground up as paste for nefarious uses by the Conspiracy."

"Hollow Earth?" said Connie.

"Conspiracy?" asked Bismuth.

"Grind up the what as what?" drawled an incredulous Lapis.

"Yeah! Ronaldo's blog has all kinds of cool gem stuff on it," exclaimed Steven.

All eyes turned to the teen, Peridot giving him a look of faint betrayal as he was fishing his phone out of his pocket.

"Back when Connie and I were first hanging out together I tried to learn more about gem stuff and I found a bunch of neat things on Ronaldo's blog," said the teen, index finger swiping across his phone. "Oh, look! See, here's Amethyst."
"But- That image is from thirty months ago!" cried the technician.

"The Voleur Violet was the bane of picnickers for decades," intoned Ronaldo, "a cryptid with a taste for mayhem and actual ham that stalked the Manikota wilderness ahead of a herd of gravelkin. His reign of purple prowling ended only when the pursuing herd was trapped in an avalanche, allowing him to reclaim the lost pearl of power with which to breach the fabled Yogi Barrier: a mystic force that prevents campground cryptids from escaping their forested prison. He has since returned to his home planet, Jellystone Gamma."

Lapis huffed. "That's not what- I mean, for starters it's- Okay, but-" She blinked and turned to the others, her expression worried. "Gals, Grodylocks almost made sense just now."

Steven continued to swipe on his phone. "And here you can read about Pyra making her way to Beach City."

"Ah, the wandering Scandinavian poltergeist, which used it's ghost magic to telekinetically topple pyramidal shapes," explained Ronaldo while self-consciously tucking some of his yellow hair under his hat. "It was trying to use them as giant dice to perform an augury, seeking the way back to its resting place."

Steven kept going. "There's mention of the Howlander, who I'm pretty sure is Wolf."

Wolf gave a prodigious yawn then barked, his large tail thumping against the couch as it wagged.

Images were flitting across the inside of Peridot's glasses-cum-visor, the gem looking a little like Connie when she was staring at some invisible mindscape. "Most of these reports are specious at best-"

Ronaldo inhaled sharply, puffing out his chest like an irate bird in a fedora.

"-however, I am finding entries that are strong matches for more than a dozen loose corrupted gems, two instances of uncovered Rebellion-era gemtech, and what might be a hitherto unknown Rose-loyalist bunker," finished Peridot.

Connie shrugged, her hand having found its way to Steven's. "I guess that makes sense, ma'am. You have that old terraforming network that covers a lot of the planet, but people are everywhere. This is like a secondary detection network driven by-" Connie looked at Ronaldo and the her sentence stumbled, the girl very specifically not saying 'weirdos.' "-Driven by curious individuals," she said eventually.
Ronaldo puffed up again, this time with pride. "My network of truth-seekers number in the thousands."

Lapis gave him a long stare.

"In the hundreds," he amended.

The stare continued, one of Lapis' eyebrows *sloooowly* rising.

"In the hundred," he said finally. Then he gestured to the robonoids perched around the room.

"One hundred and ten as of today. But what they lack in numbers they make up for in tenacity and an abundance of free time. Besides," he said hastily, "the sheeple masses post evidence of the Truth online even if they don't recognize it as such. Much of what my fellow truth-seekers do is seek out the lost Truth-socks at the bottom of the global ball pit that is the Web."

Lapis' glare relented, becoming an eyeroll and some muttered quip about what else gets found at the bottom of ball pits.

Steven squeezed Connie's hand. "I bet there's all kinds of awesome, hidden secrets that people have taken pictures of!" he cheered.

There was a pointed throat-clearing noise from Peridot, a hologram pulled up in front of her. On it a beagle with a yellow stone set in its chest was padding alongside Steven, the pair walking along the side of the road near a wooded area. The caption beneath the photo read, *Polymorphic rock-canine hybrid? Pet, protector, or just begging for scraps?*

Connie's grip on Steven's hand became crushing. "That, um-" She licked her lips. "That must be from when we were doing my shapeshifting power testing."

Steven was making inarticulate stammering noises.

"The photo is time stamped from thirteen days ago." Peridot's tone was dry as the desert they'd just come from. "Your power testing was in August."

While Connie joined Steven in making wordless noises of distress, a smirking Lapis nudged Peridot. "We just took Snoopy off her leash, Dot. Remember? Let it go. Besides, girllie's birthday is soon, which at her age is the ultimate 'get out of jail free' card."

Peridot's lips were a thin line but she said nothing further. Connie and Steven both shrank under her sustained glare.

"Citrine used some human informants. Scouts," said Jasper, the warrior still keeping Ronaldo in her sights but with less of an air of coiled action about her.

Bismuth nodded. "Yeah, humans were just walking scenery to Homeworld."

Ronaldo's eyes were wide and his lower lip was quivering, on the verge of tears, though it was unclear if they were of sadness or happiness. "You- You want to combine forces to combat the Conspiracy?" he said in a wavering voice.

"I... wouldn't phrase it in that exact manner," said Peridot, choosing her words carefully. "But your... organization's findings could augment our own intelligence gathering apparatus. This would be to the betterment of the Earth and humanity both."

"And you'll subscribe to my blog?" asked Ronaldo, his voice steadily rising in pitch like he was
being slowly crushed in a vice of vindication.

Peridot paused, looking like someone wondering if the next step would be the one to set off a landmine. "If you count my ersatz robonoids as peripheral members, then between them and the Steven's readership, you already have a majority of the Crystal Gems receiving updates. I think that will be quite sufficient."

Ronaldo started to squee, then tried to cover it up by clearing his throat. He ended up giving himself a short-lived coughing fit. Eventually regaining his composure, he said in what was intended to be a calm and confident voice. "That is an... acceptable show of good faith."

"Oh!" exclaimed Steven. "And Ronaldo can use the warp pads to go around and investigate mysteries!"

"I don't think-" started Peridot.

"And corroborate with far-flung truth-seekers in person!" declared a visibly excited Ronaldo.

"I mean, it is hypothetically-" said Peridot, trying and failing to be heard in the conversational maelstrom.

"And attend conventions outside the tri-state area!" Ronaldo actually had to wipe away a tear as he stared into a future so bright it made his eyes water.

"I believe-" Peridot all but shouted, forcibly regaining control of the conversation. "-That some manner of arrangement can be made for selective, scheduled, and supervised warp network transit."

This time Ronaldo didn't even attempt to hide the squee.

There was a distant tapping sound. All eyes roved around until Robinson was spotted rapping on the window seat window. Once the bot had people's attention, it raised a napkin covered in chicken scratch writing up to the glass.

"Dot? What's that Tinkertoy doing?" asked Lapis a second later.

"Ah yes," answered Ronaldo, his tone serious once more. "Your spheritor is quite right: there is a more pressing matter than purchasing advanced tickets for Kawaii Kon. A truth-seeker working for UPSETI-"

"For what?" blurted out Connie, the question tumbling out of her mouth.

"It's the Urgent, Pangalactic Scan for Extraterrestrial Invaders, because if SETI can ignore the 'for' in their acronym then so can we," declared Ronaldo. "Anyway, a message was received of grave import; one that could shake the very foundations of civilization; one which could alter the course of past, present, and future; one that-"

Lapis used her wings to rise a few feet in the air and loom, her arms crossed. "The message, fry-jockey."

Ronaldo tried to retreat a step but bumped into the open bathroom door instead. "Right. I'll play it for you now." He started fumbling for the phone in his pocket.

The blue gem hovered back down. "You do that."

Bismuth elbowed Lapis, giving the gem a look then nodding her head in Ronaldo's direction. What
followed was a pantomimed discussion, Lapis' half including multiple gestures for 'hat' and 'crazy.' Bismuth ended with an eyeroll and a playful shove to Lapis' shoulder.

"So I just talk into this glowy thing," said a voice from Ronaldo's outraised phone.

"Am- Amethyst?" Connie croaked in disbelief.

"That is correct," said a second voice, one which sounded startlingly similar to the green Homeworld gem that had remotely confronted the Crystal Gems in the Kindergarten just over two weeks ago. "I have already begun broadcasting."

"Oh, okay Peridude." Amethyst cleared her throat. "Hey Crystal Jerks." There was a pause. "And Citrine. Though when I get back you better have tried to help my pack or you're going right back in the jerk pile."

"Your warning, Amethyst?" said the other voice.

"Ouais," said Amethyst in French. Switching back to English, she continued, "Since you jerks keep breaking Peridot's stuff, she's got to go to Earth to do a thing. She figures you're going to keep doing that so she wanted me to tell you that she's allowed to blow most of you into teenie tiny pieces if you get in the way. And she's got beaucoup firepower to do it too. Also, I've got a score to settle with most of you and they're making me leave my new family to come along, so I will punch you if you get in the way." There was a chuckle and then, "I kind of hope some of you do. They're not big on punching here and-

Amethyst's voice faded into the background, though you could tell that a rant was going on in a mix of French and English. However, in the aural foreground came the second voice, the voice of the Homeworld Peridot. "I do not hope you will resist. I wish to state that for the record. This is Peridot Facet-2B2Y Cut-5XG, by the way. Hello again."

The background rant further faded out, as though Amethyst were pacing a wide circuit while she went. The Peridot's voice cut back in. "However, I am authorized to use lethal force against rebel interference. It is my sincere hope that you are not entirely bereft of reason and --having been warned by a known associate and having been credibly threatened by your technological superior-- you will realize the futility of attempting to impede my work. Novaculite told me it is unwise to inform the enemy when you will arrive, so merely be informed that I will be arriving in the future." A pause. "Unless you've regressed past the point of receiving era-appropriate broadcasts. Then I may have already arrived. If that is the case, you may disregard the irrelevant portions of this message."

There was a beat of silence then the Homeworld Peridot's voice came through quieter, as if she'd stepped away from the microphone. "Note to self: send intimidation message in primitive fo-" and the audio abruptly cut off.

There was complete silence in the moments that followed.

Ronaldo pocketed his phone, fixing everyone present with a look of the utmost seriousness. "As I said, this has potentially enormous implications, so there's no time to waste." He drew a somber breath. "We must find out who these 'Crystal Jerks' are and learn what insights they can be made to share."

Chapter End Notes
The in-chapter art was drawn by MjStudioArts.

In the world of Connie Swap, Ronaldo actually has a fair-sized readership of his blog, as well as a core of very motivated weirdos fellow truth-seekers. This difference was first hinted at in Episode 5, Chapter 3, when Steven showed Connie that picture of Bigfoot!Amethyst. In the top-left corner you'll see that the number of notes associated with the KBCW entry was respectably high. Another nice little detail I'm glad MJ worked into the pic in this chapter is that the number of notes has increased, a little show of verisimilitude since it's been many in-universe months since Ep5. Nicely done, MJ.

Keep Beach City Weird

And so we finally come to the conclusion of Notes from the Undergrounded. Per our schedule, we'll be taking a week off between episodes, so you can expect some omake content to go up this Wednesday. However, join us Wednesday, May 22nd for the start of Episode 34: Connie's Birthday

Everyone is getting ready: for Connie's 14th birthday and Homeworld's eventual mission to Earth. Maybe this will be the year Connie has her first
normal birthday. Or maybe some guests from waaay out of town will be joining them. They better not be expecting cake if they do.

Edit: Also, double bingo!

If you have a Connie Swap story burning in your soul that you want to see in our official, curated Omake collection, drop us a comment either in the Omake fic or here in the main fic and we'll get in touch.

Connie Swap has an official Discord for the fans. [Come check it out](#).

As usual, we'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments and your asks at the [Connie Swap Tumblr](#). Thanks for reading!
Timeline

Chapter Notes

I know the format for this episode was a little trickier than most to follow. To help out, I'm including the complete timeline of events, with references to the chapters they appear in. I hope that helps.

September 16th: Connie is grounded (End of Ep32)

September 17th: Lapis talks to Steven's parents and Peridot talks to Doug about Connie being grounded (Ch1)
September 17th: Lapis talks to Steven and Peridot talks to Connie about fusion (Ch2)

September 18th: Asmi spars with Jasper, splits trying to summon their sword, Connie and Steven fight (Ch3)

September 19th: Connie sneaks out the first time, she and Steven reconcile (Ch4 and Ch5)

September 20th: Bismuth joins Jasper on patrol, the two talk about their feelings about Citrine and the revelations from her journal. (Ch6)

September 21st: Colored Perception power testing (Ch7)

September 22nd: The Universe family help analyze the Corruption Event audio (Ch8)

September 23rd: Connie and Jasper attempt to cure Biggs, Connie purges the corruption relapse in Jasper, Connie's hearing is restored (Ch9)

September 24th: Lutes and Loot at Jeff's house, Peedee recommends Connie attend therapy with Dr. Brooks (Ch4 and Ch10)

October 1st: Connie's 1st therapy session (Ch4)

October 5th: Steven and Connie's 1-month-iversary date, Sour Cream's concert in San Francisco (Ch10)

October 8th: Connie's 2nd therapy session (Ch4)

October 11th: Connie, Jasper, and Garnet check if the bubbled, embedded gems are corrupted (Ch10)

October 15th: Connie's 3rd therapy session (Ch4)

October 19th: The first plug robonoid lands on Earth, Peridot attempts to subvert it (Ch11)

October 20th: Jasper, Lapis, and Bismuth hunt additional plug robonoids (Ch11)

October 21st: Tik-Tok subverted, the Crystal Gems confront/thwart P2 in the Prime Kindergarten Control Room (Ch11)
October 22nd: Connie purges Umbra and takes it to Mask Island, then spawns a bunch of shadow tricksters there to get rid of the excess negative energy (Ch12)
October 22nd: Connie's 4th therapy session (Ch4)

October 24th: Connie sneaks out as a beagle to see Steven (Ch10)

October 29th: Connie's 5th therapy session (Ch4)

November 6th: Connie and Bismuth stop at the fry shop, Peedee checks in with Connie about her therapy (Ch4)
November 6th: Ronaldo receives the message from Amethyst and P2, introduces the robonoids to KBCW (Ch13)
November 6th: All the Crystal Gems go on a mission to capture a desert-dwelling corrupted gem (Ch14)
November 6th: The fight with the forced fusion-corruption, Asmi defeats it (Ch15)
November 6th: Connie heals herself and Steven at the sanctuary, Asmi is allowed and Connie is ungrounded (Ch16)
November 6th: Ronaldo reveals the message to the Crystal Gems and is made a limited partner of the CG intelligence apparatus (Ch16)

End Notes

Keeping track of all the updates to Connie Swap can get a little difficult, can't it? It doesn't have to be! If you go to the Connie Swap Series page and click the "Subscribe" button then you will receive an email alert every time a new episode is posted or a new chapter is added to ANY fic in Connie Swap.

One button. All the updates.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!