Putting It Back Together

by CompletelyDifferent

Summary

When some ancient and unknown Homeworld technology accidentally erases their memories, the Crystal Gems assume that the amount of time they're missing is insignificant. After-all, for beings that measure their life-span in millennium, thirteen years is trivial.

Or normally it is. But it appears that these last thirteen years have been more eventful than the previous thirteen centuries combined, and it becomes clear that the Gems cannot afford to forget any of it. Now, with their leader gone, and saddled with a half-human boy who claims to be her son, they must somehow find a way to restore what they lost.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

It was clear that something was off from the moment they woke up.

Because that's the thing. They normally don't wake up. They normally don't sleep in the first place, so there's nothing to wake up from. Even when they retreat into their gems, they're not asleep; they're perfectly conscious in their own pocket-dimension mind-scape, even if they're unaware of the outside world. Amethyst is the only one who chooses to sleep at all, and she instantly realized that even sleep was different from this. When she wakes up from a nap, it's a slow, comfortable thing, like your mind softly drifting into focus. Here, it was more like everything had just snapped into place instantly. It was jarring and confusing and generally just unpleasant.

Upon regaining consciousness the three Gems started picking themselves off the ground- if it could even count as ground, being so muddy as to practically be considered liquid. None were sure how or why they ended up in such a situation.

“Ugh, disgusting,” Pearl muttered, irritably wiping the mud off herself once she finally managed to rise to her feet. Her two companions were seemingly unperturbed by the muck, and instead turned their attention to their surroundings; Amethyst with open and obvious confusion, Garnet with her expression hidden behind her glasses.

“Where are we?” Amethyst asked. They were standing on a mountain side, overlooking a vast rainforest, surrounded by the crumbling remains of Gem architecture. The sky overhead was heavy with clouds, and they could hear the ominous rumbling of thunder in the distance.

“Looks like the Dome of Knowledge,” answered Garnet.

“Oh, yes,” Pearl said, with a tone of clear distaste which suggested that said place was worst than the mud she'd just finished wringing out of the ribbon tied around her waist (a ribbon she couldn't recall previously having, but nonetheless). “I remember this place. Why on Earth did we come here?”

There was an uneasy silence, as the three of them stared around at the dusty old marble columns, then at each other.

“...none of us remembers, do we?” asked Amethyst. She received two terse nods in response.

“I don't like this,” said Garnet.

“Me neither,” Pearl agreed. “I've always hated this place. To call it the 'Dome of Knowledge', considering the kind of technology they developed here- simply disgraceful, I tell you. And something here must have activated- no wonder none of us can remember how we got here or what we were doing or why-”

“Ok, yeah,” Amethyst said, cutting off the other Gem's increasingly hysterical rant. “So we got hit by some of Homeworld's old memory tech or whatever. But how? I mean, I don't think any of us aimed it at ourselves.”

Pearl's expression momentarily froze before growing even more distressed.

Garnet laid a comforting hand on her shoulder, then addressed them both. “The technology here has
spent thousands of years exposed to the elements. It easily could have malfunctioned and spontaneously activated. A controller would not be necessary.

“However,” she continued. “I think we should return to the Temple. We shouldn't be wandering around here without knowing what happened. Or why we came in the first place.”

It was a sound idea—perhaps a bit embarrassing, having to return from the mission with nothing to show for it, but it wasn't like there was much alternative. Thankfully, they weren't far from the warp pad; waking up in a strange place with a gap in their memories had put the three Crystal Gems on high alert, and they were jumping at shadows. (Not literally, although Pearl did end up eviscerating a falling branch with her spear). They neither found nor saw anything that was actually dangerous, however, and they managed to warp away without any trouble.

No, the trouble started when they actually arrived.

“Uh...where are we?” asked Amethyst, staring around at the unfamiliar place the three found themselves in upon re-materializing.

“It looks like a human house,” Pearl said. “But how? Did we go to the wrong place?”

But they hadn't, and they knew it. The Temple was a beacon, imbued with their own power; it called to them, and no matter what happened, they would always be able to sense it. Nonetheless, all three turned around to confirm it; and there was the door, same as ever.

But it was in a middle of a human house.

It was clearly a human house. It was made of wood, and it had a kitchen, and a little seating area, and some stairs leading to an odd little alcove and— and a portrait of Rose Quartz hanging above the door—

“This is very odd,” commented Garnet. Her voice was as even as ever, but the two Gems had been with her for thousands of years, and they could tell that she was confused as the rest of them. The sudden appearance of the human dwelling was utterly baffling; humans had long-since learned that it was just better for everyone involved to generally stay clear of the Temple, and the Gems hadn't even needed a moat for centuries. The fact that one would even think to build something here was ludicrous. Not to mention the amount of time it would take. As a species, humans had become much faster at construction in the last few decades, what with the development of technology such as ‘cranes’ and ‘electric screwdrivers’, but surely it would still take months to build something like this? Why would they have even allowed such a thing to happen? And why couldn't they remember it happening? Just how much time had they forgotten?

None of them knew the answers, but they were sure there was someone who would.

“Let's go look for Ro—” Pearl began, voicing what they were all thinking, but she was cut off mid-sentence as the door to the odd mystery house burst open, causing all three of them to start with surprise

“You're back!” The intruder was a human child. They were fairly certain it was a child, at least; he was quite small. It was this knowledge— that he was merely a tiny human infant, innocent and harmless— which kept the three Crystal Gems from immediately summoning their weapons out of pure shock and suspicion.

(Though there was something else that stayed Garnet's hand, though she couldn't quite pin-point what. Something about this child felt strange... or perhaps familiar...)
The child bounded towards them, apparently completely unaware of how tense and surprised the three aliens were. “I'm so glad you’re back! The parade finished like, half-an-hour ago, but there's still stuff going on- there's this magician, and they're giving out glow-sticks, oh, and shaved-iced, I bet you'd really like...” he trailed off. “Why are you three looking at me like that? And why are you covered in mud? Did something happen on the mission?”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Pearl spoke first, doing her best to keep her voice even and non-confrontational, and only mostly succeeding. “May I ask what you're doing here?”

“Uh...well...I came here to get my magic cards, to show the magician. But then I saw you guys warp in...and...” He looked almost as confused as they were.

Amethyst stepped in then, decided to try a different tactic. “What's all this doing here?”

She waved her arm in a large, expansive gesture; the boy followed it with his gaze, only looking even more puzzled. “All of what? I cleaned up this morning.”

“All of what- this house! What's this house doing here?”

“Er- it's... being a house? What's with you guys, anyway? You're acting really weird.”

Pearl wanted to laugh at that; they were not the ones being weird in this situation. But before she could say as much to the human child, Garnet stepped forward, cutting her off.

“I'm afraid that you are going to need to give us a little more explanation,” Garnet said. “We are suffering from some memory loss, and may have forgotten some things, such as the construction of this building. We would be grateful for your help.”

The boy stood there, looking up at Garnet and the other Gems with very wide eyes.

“Memory loss?” he asked, in a small voice.

“Yes,” Garnet confirmed.

“So...you don't know who I am?”

Both Amethyst and Pearl shifted uneasily at those words. Garnet's expression was unreadable behind her glasses.

“No,” she said, not unkindly.

The boy's wide eyes suddenly looked very shiny; he blinked rapidly. Then he seemed to square himself, clenching his hands into tiny, tight fists. “You three built the house, a few years ago. For me.”

“Why would we have done that?” asked Amethyst, crossing her arms. Her tone wasn't exactly suspicious, but neither did she seem all that convinced.

“Because I'm magic,” the boy began to explain, but Pearl interrupted him.

“Magic?!” she exclaimed. “I've never heard anything so preposterous! You can't have magic. You're human.”

“I'm only half human. I'm also half Gem,” the boy told her. The pronouncement was met with
exclams of surprise, but he didn't let anyone disrupt his explanation—there was a look of determination on his face. “Rose was my mom.”

“What?” all three of the Gems exclaimed in unison.

“That's ridiculous!” Pearl half-laughed. Her left eye was twitching slightly. “Gems can't reproduce!”

“She's right. Nice try, kid.”

“I'm telling the truth! I'll prove it. My name is Steven Quartz Universe and I'm a Crystal Gem!” And with that, the human pulled up his shirt—red, emblazoned with a yellow star—and showed his gem.

His gem. Which was pink and round with a pentagonal cut and sitting in the middle of the boy's stomach, just like Rose Quartz's.

If, for even a moment, any of them doubted whether the boy was telling the truth, and thought perhaps that gemstone was just one bearing remarkable similarity to Rose's, they dismissed the thought immediately. They knew it was hers. Gems can always sense other Gems; and even if this human boy's organic body had masked that sense, once their attention had been drawn to it, there was no ignoring the subtle touch of Rose Quartz's essence.

Mouths fell open. Pearl literally shrieked.

She rushed immediately over to the human, kneeling down to get a closer look. Amethyst came to crane over her shoulder as Pearl poked at the pink gem, eyes wide. She seemed to be at a loss for words, unable to do anything but continue prodding it.

“Hehehe,” Amethyst laughed nervously. “Is this—this some kind of prank, Rose? Because it's a good one. Great shapeshifting. Really fooled us.”

“It's not a joke,” both Steven and Garnet said in unison, though only the latter continued to say, “that is a genuine organic body. You can feel it. Though how the gem got in there, I don't know.”

“Of course you don't know!” Pearl wailed, breaking out of her shock-induced trance. “That's because it should be impossible! Gems and organic matter are separate, they don't mix, I—” she broke off, staring intently at the gem embedded in the boy's belly-button for a long moment, before saying in a hushed tone, “we have to get it out.”

And then she lunged forward, clamping her fingers around the stone's edges, and began to pull.

“Woah! Pearl, stop it!” the human shouted. When she didn't, he swatted her away with a surprising amount of force.

Pearl began to move in again, undeterred, and the boy backed away, unease written through every inch of his body. “Stop!” he repeated. “It's my Gem! You can't take it out! I've had it since I was born!”

But Pearl didn't seem willing to listen.

“Pearl.” Garnet had come forward, and laid a hand on the other Gem's shoulder; not forceful, but a restraint, nonetheless. Then she addressed the human. “How is this possible?”

“I...I don't really know, or understand...I was just a baby, nobody's really ever explained...” A flash of inspiration crossed his face, hopeful and desperate. “My Dad! I bet he'll know! Let me go get him—he'll be able to explain everything!”
The child didn't even wait for the other Gems to respond; he just took off, racing for the door. As he disappeared through it, a stunned Pearl rose to her feet and prepared to chase after him, but Garnet's steady hand held her back. She tried to shove it off, to no avail, instead forcing her to turn towards her friend with a look of fury. “What are you doing?!” she half-screamed. “That thing has Rose's gem! We can't just let it run away!!”

Amethyst nodded; there was an intense look on her face, and for once, she and Pearl appeared to be in complete agreement.

Slowly, Garnet shook her head. “We do not know what is going on here. We need more information. The boy- Steven,” she hesitated on the name. She usually didn't bother with them, seeing as humans tended to collect so many, and live such short lives, that it was rarely worth the effort, but she suspected this one may be important. “He appears to know someone who can give it to us. While he finds this person, we will have a chance to conduct our own investigation, and see if we can confirm his claims.”

“What if he doesn't return?” Pearl demanded, wringing her hands.

“I think he will.”

“OK. Fine. After all,” Amethyst said, a literal predatory look in her eyes as her body morphed into the form of a wolf. “If he doesn't, we'll just hunt him down.”

Neither of the other Gems disagreed.

Chapter End Notes

Little plot bunny that couldn't go away, so eventually I just broke down and wrote it. I haven't had this beta'd or anything, but I still hope you all enjoy it. :D
Chapter 2

Greg watched as the last car in the queue drove off, wondering if it would be worth keeping It's A Wash open any longer that day. Parades always brought in tons of people (or at least, tons compared to the usual number he got), but now that it was finished, most of the tourists had drove off. There would probably be a few more who were staying overnight at the local motel, but right now, those folks would probably be heading out for dinner, or enjoying the last of the festivities on the boardwalk.

The old rock-star would appreciate a chance to look at those festivities himself, to be honest. Not that any of it wasn't something he'd seen over a dozen times before- every year, they'd pull out the same stock of balloon-artists, mimes, puppeteers, etc- but he didn't mind much. It was fun. Especially with Steven there, always acting like each performance was the greatest and coolest thing he'd ever seen in his life.

Speaking of Steven...where was he? The kid had ran off a while ago, wanting to get his 'magic set' from home. Said magic set was just some stuff Greg had picked up cheap from a garage sale a few months back- an old black hat, a long handkerchief scarf, a set of playing cards and a book of sleight-of-hand tricks- but the boy seemed to love them. Never mind that he could literally summon an indestructible magic pink bubble or create sentient plants; Steven was just as impressed by his new ability to make the Queen of Hearts 'disappear'. He'd been pretty excited for the chance to try his skills out on a real life magician, so Greg was more than a little surprised that he hadn't come back yet.

Just as Greg was wondering if maybe Steven had just gone straight to the boardwalk, he heard the slap of small sandals of the pavement, and a familiar voice calling, “Dad! Daaaaad!”

He began to wave to the boy, but when he straightened up and turned around properly, he could immediately tell something was wrong. The boy's chest was heaving heavily- and judging from the red around Steven's eyes, it wasn't from physical exertion, but barely suppressed tears. “Steven!” Greg called, bending down to wrap him in a warm hug as he ran up to him. “What's wrong?”

Steven didn't accept the hug, instead beginning to bounce anxiously on the spot. “It's the Gems! You've gotta come!”

“No time,” the boy said, grabbing Greg's arm and tugging at it.

The kid was unusually strong for his size, but Greg didn't simply allow himself to be dragged along. “Now, look, Steven, I'll help if I can, but you know I'm not really…”

“This isn't a monster or anything!” Steven said, his tugging getting more insistent. “This is something only you can do! Come on!”

Greg perked up at that. Generally, he was just barely treading water when it came to all this magic stuff, but ever since the Wailing Stone incident, he'd been feeling like he had a lot more to offer to the Gem-side of Steven's life. It had been great to know that he'd actually helped the Gems with
something that they couldn't otherwise do; it had been even greater to get that handshake and appreciation from Garnet. If something like that had cropped up again, he'd be more than happy to help...

Unfortunately, as the pair ran towards the temple and Steven began to explain the situation, Greg's enthusiasm began to fade. By the time he knew the whole story, it had vanished completely. The Gems' memories were gone? He couldn't believe it.

Or rather, he could believe it perfectly fine- with all the strange stuff the Gems were always facing, memory loss was hardly a stretch. He just didn't want to. He was desperately tempted to ask his son whether he was sure, and whether this could all just be a misunderstanding; but no, he doubted that Steven would be wrong about something like this. And the kid was clearly distraught- why wouldn't he be? He adored the Gems, but now they didn't even remember him...

But honestly, Greg wasn't even sure how much help he could be. If they didn't remember Steven... well, that was over ten years of their memory, gone. They could easily have forgotten a lot more. What if they didn't even know who he was? Greg had had a hard enough time getting the three of them to accept him the first time around, even when he'd been a somewhat-proper musician and had had Rose at his side, supporting him every step of the way. He didn't know if he would be able to convince the Gems of anything, without her.

But he knew he had to try. What other option was there?

After half-jogging across the beach and up the sandy slope to the Temple, Greg was feeling pretty out of breath, though Steven seemed perfectly fine. Greg could never tell if that was just the usual youthful energy of kids, or something he'd gotten from his mother. Steven wanted to head into the house immediately, but the older man insisted that they pause first; he didn't want to be wheezing while he had this particular conversation. (He swore to himself that he wasn't stalling for time at all).

Eventually his breathing became regular once more, and he let Steven open the door into his house.

At first, everything seemed shockingly normal. Both Pearl and Amethyst were inside, looking much as they usually did, the first inspecting one of Steven's toys with a slightly critical expression, the latter crawling around on the kitchen counter. However, the instant the two of them walked in, the Gems snapped to attention with an intensity they usually reserved for battle, their eyes first flickering to Steven, then to him.

Amethyst was the first to put it together, her eyes widening in recognition. “Greg?”

“Heh. So you do know me,” the man said, rubbing the back of his neck as the two Gems approached, Amethyst sliding off the counter. They looked...disbelieving? Baffled? Skeptical? He couldn't quite tell.

“Dude, you look so old!”

“Amethyst!” Pearl exclaimed.

“It's okay,” Greg said, with a wave of his hand. He couldn't pretend that her comment didn't sting a little, but she wasn't exactly wrong. Besides, none of the Gems were really known for their tact when it came to human stuff, and there were more important things to worry about. “How do you...remember me looking?”

“Well, you had more hair, to start with.”

Greg sighed. That didn't really give him much of a time-frame to work with, considering the hair loss
had only really set in after Steven was born.

Speaking of which... “So- you really don't remember Steven? At all?”

“No,” both the Gems said, narrowing their eyes at the boy in question.

Steven had been remarkably quiet throughout the whole exchange, standing very close to Greg—close enough that his dad could literally feel him tense up. He laid a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder while he tried to work out what to say next—only for Pearl to go before he had the time to do so.

“This...Steven,” she said, hesitating painfully on the name, “claims that he's Rose's son. Are you about to tell me that you're the father?”

“Yes,” Greg said, plainly. He could tell that this response didn't go over particularly well, judging by the Gems' body language. “Look, where's Garnet? She should be here for this.”

“In the Temple,” Amethyst said, waving vaguely behind her.

“But we don't need to wait for her,” Pearl began. “You might as well start telling your ludicrous story right n-”

Almost as though on cue, there was a soft swoosh sound as the door to the Temple split open, with Garnet stepping through into the house. “I'm here,” she announced as the magical door shut behind her.

She didn't seem to react at all to Greg's presence. How she managed to remain so calm and stoic all the time, Greg didn't have the faintest clue, but he was thankful nonetheless. If anyone was going to be the much needed voice of reason in the upcoming conversation, it would be Garnet.

“OK, great, everyone but Rose is here,” said Amethyst, clapping her hands together. “Now can you tell us what is going on?”

“Please, do,” Pearl said with narrowed eyes.

The three Gems approached, giving him his utmost attention. It was nerve-wracking, just as it always was- and it didn't help when he felt Steven tugging on his shirt, bright encouragement in his voice. "Yeah, c'mon Dad,” he said. “Tell 'em how it happened!”

Greg looked at the Gems, then repressed a sigh as he looked down at his son, instead forcing a smile onto his face. “Hey, Stewball, why don't you run off and go see that magician? I heard he's got this live dove that he can pull out of his pocket,” said Greg.

The boy's gaze flickered from the Gems to him. “But Dad-”

“Go on. The adults need to talk, Steven. It's probably gonna be pretty long and boring,” he said, which was only half a lie.

Steven stared up at him. Greg stared back, trying to convey as much as he could with a single look; reassurance, but also a way to say, I don't want you here for this, please...

Eventually, the boy's shoulders slumped in defeat. “Okay,” he said, waving half-heartedly at his mentors. “I'll see you guys around.”

He trudged slowly back towards the door. The Gems- or at least those who's eyes could be seen-
watched him the entire way, an intensity in their gaze that suggested that they didn't particularly want the boy going where they couldn't see him. Once he was out the door, Pearl immediately opened her mouth to speak; but Greg raised a hand, and pressed a finger to his lips. Only once the sound of Steven's footsteps had completely faded did he motion for her to continue.

“So,” she said. “I can certainly see how he could be your son. But Rose Quartz?”

“Yeah, man,” said Amethyst. She had gone to sit cross-legged in the middle of the living room floor, head propped up on her hands. “How would that be even possible?”

“Same way it's possible for you to eat, Amethyst,” said Greg. “She just shape-shifted the, uh, relevant parts.”

Pearl opened her mouth to protest, but she seemed to choke on her words as she processed what the man had just said.

“Why would she do that?” asked Garnet. She didn't seem judgmental, or disbelieving, just genuinely confused.

“Because she wanted to,” Greg said simply. “Look, we'd been together for nearly fifteen years at that point, and Rose said she wanted a kid. I wasn't sure at first...but eventually, I agreed.” The hesitation hadn't been because he hadn't wanted kids; he'd always loved children. It was just that he had known how dangerous and strange Rose's world was, and he hadn't been sure if that would be fit for a child. But the way her face had lit up whenever she watched kids playing on the beach, or at the arcade—how could he not? “So we did research. Got...diagrams, that kind of thing. It wasn't actually all that difficult.

“Then, about a month into her pregnancy, Rose told me...” Greg swallowed heavily before continuing. “She said, she'd been been conducting her own research and experiments, and she was pretty sure, that after the baby- Steven- was born, he'd get her gem. And that she'd become part of him.” Greg hadn't understood that at the time; nearly twelve years later, and he still wasn't completely sure that he did.

The gems' eyes bulged. “And you let her?” cried Amethyst.

“I did not let her,” Greg said. “I begged her to reconsider. Told her she didn’t have to go through with the pregnancy. You guys told her the same thing, dozens of times!” The man shook his head. “She wouldn’t hear any of it. She wanted that baby, more than anything.”

“More than anything?” Pearl said, in a low, dangerous voice.

Greg knew what was coming; he'd lived through it before, after all. “Pearl...”

“No,” the Gem said, advancing towards him, eyes ablaze. “I'll tell you what Rose wanted, more than anything. She wanted to protect this planet. She gave up everything to do so. She would not risk all of that for some human baby!

“Besides,” Pearl continued, stomping her foot. “It's not even possible. Gems and organic life can't mix.”

“Uh, that's not completely true,” said Amethyst, in a tiny voice.

Pearl turned on the purple Gem, who Greg suddenly realized looked very small. She hadn't physically shrunk. She still looked identical to how she'd been for the past decade. But somehow, past the mane of pale hair and the tattered pants, past the teenage shape she'd adopted, Greg was
suddenly fiercely reminded of the toddler-like girl he'd first met on the beach all those years ago.

Under Pearl's fierce glare she seemed to shrink even further, but Amethyst didn't back down. “There's that moss Rose created,” she pointed out. “You know, the stuff that she hauls up the mountain every year?”

“That is not the same. Moss is a completely different order of magnitude from human beings. Besides, creating the moss didn't kill Rose.” She bent down and looked Amethyst straight in the eyes. “Because that is what Greg is telling us. That Rose is dead.”

Apparently, Amethyst hadn't really seemed to realize that before; or perhaps she hadn't been able to process it, had gone into denial. But now that Pearl had spelled it out for her, the ramifications of the situation truly began to sink in. Her hands clenched into fists. Amethyst stared at him then, challenging him, begging him, to say that wasn't true, that this was all just a big misunderstanding. But it wasn't, and Greg had no choice but to tell her as much.

The screech of grief Amethyst unleashed was physically painful; Greg had no choice but to cover his ears. Through the ringing he watched as Amethyst turned to Garnet, screaming, but upon receiving no alternative or consolation, ran towards him, tears beginning to stream down her face. “You're lying,” she told him, once he'd stopped blocking his ears. “You're lying. Rose wouldn't leave. She wouldn't...”

What could Greg say? Nothing. And eventually, the little Gem just crumpled to the floor by his feet and started crying.

Garnet was standing to the side, expression having hardly changed, yet somehow managing to look lost and unsure. Pearl, meanwhile, was merely leaning against one of the supporting wooden pillars, surveying him with an expression of disdain. “You really do believe what you're saying, don't you?”

“There's nothing to believe, Pearl,” he said, exhausted. “That's what happened.”

She laughed, but it was a cruel sound. “Oh, yes, of course. That's what happened. Just like how Rose Quartz saw you playing on the beach, and instantly fell in love with you, the human who calls himself 'Mr. Universe'. That's just how it happened, right?

“You honestly believe you're something special. That Rose truly feels some special connection with you, that you're not just one of the dozens of pets she's picked up over the past five-thousand years.” A strange smile spread across her face. “Bet you don't know about any of them, do you?”

Greg felt very cold. “Yes, I do,” he said, his voice filled with a quiet fury. It took all of his self-control to keep it from overflowing into very loud fury. “She told me about all of them. I know that she loved every single one of them; I know how much it hurt her, each time she lost one. And I know that she loved me too.”

“Mmmm,” Pearl hummed, and it was amazing how much incredulity could be held in a single sound. “And what makes you so different, then, that she supposedly decided to have a child with you?”

Truthfully, Greg didn't know. He'd asked himself the same question hundreds of times, but never decided on a satisfying answer. It would be nice to think that maybe there truly was something special about him, but he wasn't gonna kid himself. He couldn't really be better than all the other men, women and Gems that Rose had loved over the years. Sometimes, he thought that perhaps he was just the end of her rope- that by the time she met him, she simply couldn't bear to lose anyone else.
But he couldn't say that, so again, he said nothing.

They all just stood there for some time; Greg stared down at the wooden floor, listening to Amethyst's quiet sobs.

Eventually, however, the Gem's crying stopped, and she asked in a ragged voice, “So she actually gave birth to that Steven kid, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Greg.

“Humph.” Amethyst stood, quickly wiping her tears with the back of her arm. “Doesn't look like much. Bet he can't even fight. Useless,” she whispered.

“Hey now,” Greg said. The Gems could say what they wanted about him; he was an adult, they were grieving, and he'd heard it all before. But the last time they'd had this conversation, Steven was just an idea, a soft kick against the side of Rose's belly. Now he was a person, wonderful and real, and he would not have the Gems say a word against him. “Steven's not much of a fighter, but he's the sweetest guy you'll ever meet. And don't call him useless. He's saved your lives, you know.”


“Plenty of ways,” Greg said, waving his hands in a general sense. “But most recently? He rescued you from a Gem spaceship.”

“What?” all three of the Gems asked in unison.

“Yeah, a space-ship! Because guess what? Those other Gems from space came back in this giant green hand thing. You were all captured, and it would have stayed that way, if Steven hadn't busted you out.”

“.How?” Amethyst asked, mouth agape. She seemed to be having difficulty even wrapping her head around the idea.

Greg shrugged. He'd gotten the basic story from Steven, and once he'd calmed down, a more detailed recap from Garnet, but he still suspected that a lot of information had been left out. “Way I understand it, their alien tech didn't work very well against him. Guess there's some pros to being half-human, y'know?”

“Oh, please,” said Pearl, turning to her team-mates and gesturing at Greg. “Why are we still listening to him? For a good five-thousand years we haven't heard a peep from Homeworld, and he really expects us to believe that they came back after all this time, but we don't remember?”

(Greg had to admit, it did seem a bit unlikely when she put it that way).

He was just trying to marshal up some defense when Garnet said, suddenly, “He's telling the truth.”

Everyone turned to look at her, the two other Gems silently asking for an explanation. “I've been into the Temple,” she stated. “Rose's room is empty. There are no constructs at all, only clouds. In the Burning Room, there are at least thirty more bubbled gems than there were previously. There are also large amounts of green debris which I do not recognize, and which appears to be the remains of highly advanced Gem technology.”

Amethyst gulped. Pearl appeared to be doing her best fish impression. When neither of them spoke, Garnet continued, as if she just wasn't sure they truly understood; “Greg's story fits, and he has no reason to lie. It's the only sensible explanation.”
Her pronouncement was met with a leaden silence.

It wasn't fair, Greg thought. It really wasn't. The Gems had taken Rose's death hard enough the first time, and that was with eight whole months to process the idea first. Eight months might not be much in comparison with the time-scales the nigh-immortal beings were used to dealing with, but at least had been something. Now, out-of-the-blue, they were being told that Rose was gone, there was a little boy in her place, and that on top of all that, the people they'd rebelled against had finally returned.

They looked so lost.

Greg rubbed his neck. “Look,” he said. “I know...I know this can't be easy. But if it means anything... Rose trusted you to care for Steven, and you've been doing a great job. He loves you. And you might not remember, but you love him too.”

The Gems didn't seem to know how to react to that. Pearl glanced away, Amethyst scuffed her foot against the floorboards, and Garnet just seemed to stare off into the distance. Finally, though, the fusion seemed to come to some conclusion and said, “We need to restore our memories.”

Chapter End Notes

I am sooo glad that I waited until "Story for Steven” aired to finish writing this chapter. It really gave some insight into the group dynamic before Rose left. Here, I was aiming for something a bit different that what we saw there; the Gems back when they'd still had Rose, but had been hanging out with Greg for about a decade. (Also, with added grief, which is always a fun addition to any recipe!)

Next up, we'll be seeing how Steven's been taking all of this...
Chapter 3

Steven did not go to see the magician like his Dad had told him to.

He didn't even go to the boardwalk. Instead, once he was outside he made his way to the area tucked underneath the front deck, where they now permanently kept the laser light canons (just in case). Steven had only really been down there once, back when the centipeedle's attack had damaged the house, requiring Pearl to make some repairs. After a little bit of begging, she'd allowed Steven to tag along when she'd gone underneath to the building’s supports. She'd carried with her a heavy tool-kit and long planks of wood, while he'd got to hold the flashlight for her while she'd worked away. They'd discovered then that from beneath the floorboards you could hear everything that was going on in the house above perfectly; he and Amethyst had ever started having a conversation (which had eventually devolved into a fight between Amethyst and Pearl, when Pearl had accidentally hit one of her own fingers with the hammer, and complained that Amethyst had distracted her).

The sun was starting to set, so it was already dark underneath the house. Steven didn't have a flashlight with him this time, so instead he pulled his cell-phone out of his pocket and switched it on. By its dim light he was just able to make out enough of the rocks and wooden beams to find holds for his hands and feet.

Steven figured it would be a tricky climb; he'd had enough trouble with it the last time, and that had been with both of his hands available. To his surprise, however, he navigated the narrow, rocky path pretty easily, even with one hand busy holding his phone up the entire time. He guessed all those missions really had been paying off, after all.

It didn't take him long to reach the top- in fact, he reached it so quickly that he misjudged the distance, and nearly managed to bang his head against the floorboards above him. He stopped himself just in time to avoid what could have caused a nasty bruise- then hesitated for a different reason.

Should he really do this? Steven didn't really like to eavesdrop on conversations, not if he could help it, and he knew Dad didn't want him listening on this one.

But sometimes you had to, right? This was a Serious Situation, and he needed to know what was going on. It was like Mayor Dewey had said; sometimes people kept you in the dark, because they wanted to protect you...but sometimes, you had to help protect them, too.

So Steven stuffed his phone back into his pocket, twisted into a proper position, and pressed his ear against the wood above.

The sound was muffled, and it took a moment for the boy to make out what was being said. He just managed to catch the tail of his Dad saying, “- she'd become part of him.”

So he'd missed most of the explanation. That was kind of annoying, because Steven really didn't understand what it all meant, but it didn't really matter- he could ask later. The important thing was hearing how the Gems reacted.

They reacted, as they turned out, badly.
“And you let her?” screeched Amethyst, loud enough that it was perfectly clear, even through the floor.

“I did not let her. I begged her to reconsider. Told her she didn't have to go through with the pregnancy...” Steven bit his lip as he listened to his to his Dad explain. He didn't blame them; he couldn't. If he'd been in their position, and it was Amethyst, or Garnet, or Pearl who was going to... go away... he wouldn't have wanted them to leave either, even for an adorable baby...

Still, he couldn't help but flinch when Pearl started screaming. “Because that is what Greg is telling us!” she cried at Amethyst. “That Rose died.”

Did she? Steven wondered, thinking of his Mom's video, and Jasper, and the pink gem where his belly button should be. He wasn't sure. Was it dying, if you got a new body, and a new personality, and lost all your memories? Maybe at that point, it might as well be the same thing.

No wonder Amethyst started crying.

This was a bad idea, thought Steven as he lay in the cool darkness, Dad was right, I shouldn't have listened...

The boy pulled himself back from the floorboards, sliding down the rocky slope, not even bothering to take out his phone again to light the way, just letting gravity do the work. He occasionally slipped or knocked himself into something hard and painful, but he'd taken worst damage before, and ignored it. Eventually he came to the bottom, and crawled up from underneath the porch. He tried to ignore the glittering pink of his Mom's laser light canons as he pulled himself to his feet, and made his way to the beach below.

He let himself flop down on the sand, trying to let the crashing of the waves drown out the sound of Amethyst's crying that was echoing through his head...

It didn't really work.

He knew that everyone was sad about his Mom. He'd known for ages, long before he'd chased Pearl across that strawberry strewn battlefield and found her sobbing, afraid to even look at him. And he could feel their frustration, whenever he messed up, or couldn't do something that was important or magical, something that his Mom could have done, no problem...

...and it was hard, knowing that. But it was okay, because no matter how much the Gems missed Rose Quartz, no matter how much they blamed him that she was gone... they still loved him. They would protect him, and hug him, and tell them that he'd done a good job, don't worry.

But not today. 'Cause when he'd walked into the house that afternoon- there had been nothing. No recognition at all.

When he had realized what was wrong, it had been hard to remain calm. Really hard. But he had taken a deep breath, and explained, as well as he could. It had been clear that the Gems hadn't believed him, not at all- but still, he hadn't expected Pearl to grab his gem, to try and pull it out like that... and it had been kinda, kinda scary, how she wouldn't stop, even when he had asked her to, or how Amethyst hadn't done anything, or how... unaffected, Garnet had been about it all...

In his panic, all he had been able to think was, Dad, Dad will be able to fix this, they'll have to believe Dad.

And they had to, right? They had to believe that he really was Rose's kid, and that she had wanted
him to have her gem...

But... even if they did believe Dad, that wouldn't fix everything, would it? Dad was human; he couldn't bring back memories.

But the memories had to come back... right? Like, maybe after Dad explained everything, things would just snap into place! Or maybe it would just wear off naturally! Or the Gems, they'd know all about this, and know exactly how to fix it, no problem! Then, then, they wouldn't be so sad, and they'd know who he was, and everything would be fine and normal again.

Right?

Steven couldn't quite convince himself of his own words. He wished desperately that there was somebody else that could. Or just, somebody to talk to about this.

Connie.

The thought of his friend came to him suddenly, with a sharp pang of longing. He quickly dug his phone out of his pocket, his fingers automatically tapping against the touch-screen in the familiar pattern that lead to his contact list, only for them to pause before hitting the 'call' button.

Connie was at this big family thing, not just with her parents, but her grandparents and cousins and stuff. It was supposed to be this super big and important thing, one of the only times when the whole Maheswaran family could get together. It's why she hadn't been able to come to the parade with him that day, even though she'd been really excited for it, and Steven knew that she'd probably be too busy to even talk to him. Her parents might not have even let her take her phone with her.

But he still wanted to at least try and talk to her. So instead, he went to send a text, only to find his fingers hesitating again when he went to actually type.

It wasn't that he didn't want to tell her what was going on. He did. And he knew Connie would want to know. But how did you even send that kind of thing in a text?

'The gems don't know who I am and they all seem to hate me and I'm really freaking out. P.S. Are you having fun?'

No, that didn't seem right. This was the type of thing you told someone in person.

He still wanted to talk to someone, though. Ultimately, he did end up typing something to his friend; 'Wish you were here'.

It didn't help much. Steven flopped down onto his back, staring up at the sky; mostly reds and oranges right then, but if you looked straight up, it was a deep purple, with the first few stars beginning to appear in the night sky. He wondered idly if any of them were Homeworld's.

He wanted someone to come close and hug him, tell him everything would be okay, but right then, that wasn't an option. He considered calling for Lion. Steven had no idea where the big, pink cat was, but that didn't matter- Lion always seemed to show up when he needed him, no matter what. Steven figured it was some sort of magical connection thingy. It would be nice to bury his face in the cat's thick fur, or just to sit down in that strange, otherworldly place kept inside Lion's mane, at least until he ran out of air and had to leave...

But maybe that was a bad idea. Pearl hadn't reacted well the first time she'd found out about Lion- he didn't want her to see him and react like that again, not when she was already....
Instead of finishing the thought he sighed, and continued looking up at the sky, which was growing steadily darker.

There was a sharp buzzing in his hand as his phone received a text. He sat up quickly, and found that it was from Connie.

'Me too,' the girl had written in response. 'The reunion is kind of boring. Had to sneak to the bathroom to type this. How was the parade?'

Steven's throat felt tight as he replied, 'It was pretty fun'.

When he went to press send, the screen looked blurry. He blinked in confusion, then realized there was nothing wrong with the phone's screen; he'd started crying without realizing it.

He shook his head, and pressed send. Then he dropped his phone onto the sand and got up, walking towards the ocean. The cool waves lapped over his sandals as he bent down to splash water over his face. He didn't want to cry, he couldn't let himself; he needed to be strong, he needed to find a way to fix this, but instead he just had tears running down his face...

Tears.

Tears!

An idea struck him like a bolt of lightning.

He washed his face quickly- the salt water stung his eyes, but it felt good somehow, refreshing. Once he was sure he was all cleaned up, Steven ran off, swooping down to pick his phone off the ground before charging back up towards the Temple.

He paused when he arrived on the porch, however. Would it be a good idea to go in? He had to, though. Besides, he couldn't hear any crying, or screaming or anything, so this was about as good a time as ever.

Still, Steven opened the door tentatively, first peeking in through the slit. The Gems and his Dad were standing between the kitchen and the warp pad, all four of them apparently in deep discussion, though the human stood a little to the side, his hands buried deep in his pockets. All four of them looked up when they saw him enter- none of them looking particularly pleased to see him, though his Dad at least gave an attempt at a smile.

“Guys!” Steven said, putting on a smile of his own, this one more genuine. “I think I know a way to get your memories back! We could go to my Mom's fountain, I bet-”

“You know about Rose's fountain?” asked Pearl.

“Er, yeah,” Steven said, a little put off by the interruption, and the cold way the Gem was staring at him. “Amethyst cracked her Gem a while back, so you guys took me there...”

“Eh, that sounds likely,” Amethyst said with a shrug, earning a small nod of agreement from Garnet. Then the purple Gem cocked her head at the boy. “Hey, wait. If you really have Rose's gem, shouldn't you have healing tears too?”

“Uh...well, I do have healing powers, but they... haven't been working very well, so I thought it might be better if...” He looked down at the floor, embarrassed, only briefly catching a glimpse of his father doing the same. He heard Amethyst make a small 'humph' noise.
“We came to the same conclusion about the fountain,” Garnet told him, ignoring the other Gems’ comments. “We were just about to leave when you arrived.”

“Really?” Steven said, not at all irritated that the Gems had apparently had the same idea as him. He didn't care who's plan it was, as long as it got his family's memories back. “Then let's go!”

Within a couple seconds he had run across the room and was standing expectantly on the warp pad, waiting for the others to join him.

Instead, however, the Gems just seemed to stare at him, uncertain expressions on their face. Pearl was grimacing, holding her hands to her chest; Amethyst opened her mouth, then closed it again. The two smaller Gems exchanged glances, then looked at Garnet; after a moment, she merely shrugged, and stepped forward onto the crystal platform herself. After another moment of hesitation, her team-mates followed her.

“Er...” said Greg, “I'll just wait for you guys to return then.”

“Yes,” Pearl agreed, her voice cool. “That would be for the best.”

Steven grinned at him. “See you soon, Dad!”

He just caught the man giving him a hopeful smiling and raising his hand goodbye as the warp pad activated, and the world dissolved into bright light around them. As always, Steven felt the odd, floating sensation as gravity disappeared; as always, he felt himself begin to float slightly upward. He stamped down against it, trying to keep himself in position through sheer force of will. Steven had gotten pretty good at warping recently- he could activate the pads all by himself, and he hadn't fallen down in months- but for some reason, he found himself struggling this time. He kept wondering what the Gems would do if he started to float away...

His face was screwed up in an expression of intense concentration by the time the light vanished and the warp stream dropped the four of them in Rose Quartz's garden. He had floated up a bit in the warp stream, and so fell about a foot or so, but still managed to land on his feet.

It was already night at the garden. True night, not just dusk, like it had been back in Beach City. Yet Steven had no difficulty seeing. In part this was due to the clear skies above; there were no clouds at all to block to block the stars and the near-full moon. That was not the only light, however.

Throughout the garden the stones, the walls, the statues, the very fountain itself, were all glowing, filling the air with a very slight, pale pink luminescence. It was beautiful.

All four of them took a moment to savour that beauty, just taking a moment to appreciate the shimmering scene before them. Then the three Gems strode off quickly towards the fountain, Steven running in their wake. As he did so, he cast a nervous eye on the plants that ringed the area, remembering how violently they had reacted last time. Thankfully, however, it seemed that the most ominous thing about them just then was the long shadows they cast in the dim light. It had been less than a year since he and the Gems had last visited, and the plants hadn't had the chance to become nearly so wild and unmanageable.

They were all silent as they approached- at least, until Pearl said, “Why is there a giant rock just sitting here?”

Steven pressed his lips together. He knew, of course, remembering how Garnet had punched the boulder with enough force to cut through the mass of brambles which had once blocked the path- but
judging from the look on Pearl's face, he wasn't sure like it would be a good idea to say.

“I can carry it away,” offered Garnet, a gauntlet forming around her left hand.

“No, not now,” Pearl said, waving a hand, and Garnet's gauntlet vanished. “Let's get this sorted out first...”

The air was thick with the smell of roses, Steven realized, once they were nearer the fountain which flowed freely with his mother's tears. He hadn't noticed last time- or if he had, he couldn't remember noticing. He guessed he'd been pretty distracted at the time. It smelled really, really nice. The Gems must have agreed, because despite the fact they didn't need to breathe they were all taking long, deep breaths, as though they were savouring the familiar scent.

The three aliens exchanged glances, stepped forward, and then...

Garnet simply leaned down and placed her hands into the pool. Amethyst jumped in, propelling herself high into the air before making a canon-ball. Pearl smirked at her friend's antics, but then her face smoothed out as she dipped in a refined curtsy- a deep one too, far deeper than any Steven had seen on TV, so deep that it allowed the shining white gem-stone on her forehead to become fully submerged in the fountain's healing water.

Steven held his breath. Time seemed to stretch.

Finally, Garnet removed her hands; Amethyst's head popped up from under the surface; Pearl straightened out from her curtsy.

“...so?” asked Steven.

“I don't know about you two,” Amethyst said, “but I ain't remembering anything.”

“Me neither,” Pearl admitted, running a hand through her short wet hair. “But how...? Rose's tears...”

“...could never heal everything,” Garnet said. “We were aware that the technology from the Dome of Knowledge was invented with her powers in mind. We all knew this was a long-shot.”

Steven hadn't, and they hadn't bothered to tell him. He wasn't even sure what this 'Dome of Knowledge' was.

“So what are we going to do?” asked Amethyst, clambering out of the fountain. She grabbed a fistful of her shirt, and started to wring the tears out, being surprisingly careful to make sure all of it dripped back into the fountain's basin.

“We go back to the Temple, and we come up with another plan,” said Garnet, already turning back towards the warp pad.

Pearl sprinted to her side, with Amethyst not far behind. “That's easier said than done...”

None of them looked back to see if Steven was following.

He did follow, of course. But not before pausing to look back at his mother's fountain. Her statue at the centre looked so calm and peaceful, its pink glow radiant in the darkness. Steven remembered the video-tape she'd left, tucked away in Lion's mane, meant just for him. And the last words she'd said to him, before the tape had run out: “Take care of them, Steven.”

He wished he knew how.
Chapter End Notes

Aww, Steven, I'm afraid that things can never be that easy.

I'll be honest, I'm not sure how happy I am with this chapter, but I couldn't think of anyway to make it seem to flow more naturally, so I figured I might as well post it anyway. Hope you all are still enjoying the story! All your comments and support have been really wonderful.
From the top of a particularly tall trash pile, Amethyst surveyed her room.

It looked good. Really good. There was lot more junk than she remembered there being. A lot. And she was pretty impressed with how it had all been organized, if she said so herself. There was some real style to the piles.

She should have been excited by all of this. She should have wanted to explore, poke around, see if there was anything particularly cool that she’d found in the last thirteen years. However, Amethyst instead just simply let herself slide down from her perch in an avalanche of trash. A rubber duck became dislodged and hit her on the head; she didn't notice.

The purple Gem wandered her domain idly, occasionally poking at something that caught her eye; the chassis of an old car, a totem pole she was pretty sure used to belong to Greg, a chunk of some old vase, a long silver sword which probably belonged to Pearl, but must have fallen down the waterfall by mistake. She picked it up, figuring she should probably return it, but possessing no real motivation to do so, and so put it down again, figuring she could find it later.

Thing is, half the fun about collecting all this stuff was the story behind it. Who cared about some old fridge, unless you knew that you got it from this garbage dump that was attacked by a giant possessed rat monster? When Amethyst looked at all this new stuff, she didn't know where or how or why she got it- so what was the point?

As she wandered, she passed one of the tunnels leading to the Temple's heart. Pearl's voice carried through the distorted space, though it was so faint that Amethyst couldn't make out any of the words. It sounded stressed, though, enough that hearing it was enough to make Amethyst begin to tense up. At least she isn't yelling anymore, Amethyst thought. Sometimes, Pearl would get into one of those moods where she would just start freaking out about every little thing, stressing and panicking, and really Amethyst didn't know how they'd get anything done if Rose wasn't able to calm her down.

Rose.

Okay, Amethyst had to admit, as she furiously kicked an old basketball out of her way, maybe Pearl was right to freak out this time.

As soon as they'd arrived back from Rose's fountain, they had gone straight to the Temple's heart to hold a meeting. Or at least, a pathetic excuse for one. It had always seemed kinda ridiculous to Amethyst to call those things 'meetings', when after the war, it was only the four of them- and with Rose Quartz gone, it was downright laughable. They had no leader, no memories, and no plan.

And sure, they'd tried to come up with one, but it hadn't been much good. How were they supposed to fix this, if Rose's healing tears hadn't worked? None of them had the faintest clue how the super-secret, experimental memory tech worked; heck, they didn't even know what it looked like, or how they'd gotten hit with it in the first place.

And it's not like she had been really been able to add anything to the conversation. Sure, Amethyst had always been vaguely aware of the 'Dome of Knowledge', but she'd never known known about it.
Back during the war, if she'd asked, nobody would ever tell her anything, besides the fact that it was one of the main Earth-centres for Homeworld scientists and inventors. Judging by how much everyone had seemed to hate it, she'd figured there was a lot more to it than that, but she had never been able find out any more information as to why. Rose had always just told her not to mind, and to instead focus on her training, but even then Amethyst had suspected that some of the rebellion's high-ranking generals hadn't wanted a Kindergartener aware of what intel they had, in case she defected.

It was only after the war, when anyone who could have protested was gone, that Amethyst had been told anything about what went on at the Dome...and by then, of course, it hadn't really mattered anymore.

Or at least, that's what Amethyst had assumed, until she and the others got mind-blasted.

Ugh. Just the thought of it sent shivers through her body, made her want to punch something. Way Amethyst saw it, she knew that lots of ugly stuff had happened during the war, and she was fine with that- she was a Gem warrior after all, not just some naive little rock, and she knew how these things went down. But there was something- straightforward about battle. Summon a weapon, kick the enemy in the face, throw them into a wall, do so much damage that their body disintegrates. Maybe, sometimes, their gem will crack and shatter, and then bam, they're dead, no coming back; and okay, maybe that should be a last resort, but at least there's something honourable about it. There's no lies or deceit, it's just a simple matter of “who's stronger than who?”

But the stuff they'd come up with at the Dome of Knowledge? Yeah, that just wasn't right. You don't capture your enemies, and then mess with their minds, so that they don't even remember that they were enemies at all...

And of course, the big problem was that nobody had known how Homeworld was doing it. Not a single freakin' clue. The resistance had sent spies and scouts in, of course, but those who came back hadn't found out a thing. And most hadn't came back. In fact, more times than not, the missing Gems had only shown up years later, on the battlefield, fighting underneath the Homeworld's flag, with hardly a flicker of recognition for their old friends and comrades.

We should have investigated it, Amethyst thought bitterly, stomping blithely through a puddle as she rounded a trash-pile made of old mattress. We had five-thousand years after the war; we could have checked it out any time, and then maybe we wouldn't be in this mess...

She'd said as much to Pearl and Garnet, while they'd been desperately brainstorming, trying to find a solution. They hadn't appreciated the comment very much, and the 'meeting' had once again devolved into petty bickering. So Amethyst had figured she could bail- since she had nothing to contribute anyway, she might as well try and go have a little fun.

'Try' being the important world, because of course, she couldn't.

Amethyst found herself in another section of the cavern that caught the sound of her friends' voices, still discussing, still arguing, still panicking, and suddenly, the Gem knew she couldn't stay in the temple any longer. If she did, she would explode. Maybe literally. Her skin itched, and the cave's tall, crystalline walls seemed to be closing in on her, and she needed out.

She turned sharply, marching straight towards the nearest wall; she didn't even look up to see if the portal appeared, just walked forward, trusting that it would, ready to feel the cool fresh ocean wind on her face-

- only instead to get hit by the warm, musty smell of human.

Amethyst's head jerked up before she remembered. There was a human house there now. A human
house that was home to a human boy. Or half-human. Whatever.

She didn't want to deal with it, not right then, so she put her head down and went off in the direction she remembered the door being. She stopped when she reached it, however, hearing a familiar voice speaking from the other side of the wall.

“...sure you're okay staying here tonight?” she caught Greg saying. “I'd be totally fine if you wanted to crash in the van for a little while. Or we could set you up on that couch I have in the car-wash office, if that would be better.”

“No, Dad, I'm fine,” the boy answered. Amethyst took a step away from the door. “Really. Don't worry.”

“Hmm...okay, if you're sure.”

“I am.”

Greg sighed heavily. “Alright then. But if you need me for...for anything, you know where to find me.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks Dad.” There was a shuffling sound, like fabric against fabric. Were they hugging?

“Okay, kid,” Greg said after a long moment. “I'll see you tomorrow then. Good night.”

“Night,” the boy responded. There was the sound of footsteps- one pair moving away, but another, softer pair coming closer.

There were a number of things Amethyst could have done. She could have shrunk to a tiny size and skittered out of sight. She could have jumped up and clung to the ceiling beams, letting the boy walk right beneath her, never even noticing she was there. She could have, at least, put a more natural expression on her face. As it was, she panicked, and all she could do was stand there, frozen, when the half-human opened the door.

“Oh, hey Amethyst,” the boy- Steven- said with a weary smile, not noticing (or pretending not to notice) the guilty expression on her face. “What'cha doing?”

“Nothing,” she muttered, trying her best not to sound like she'd just been listening to his conversation. “Just going out. What are you doing?”

He shrugged. “Just saying good night to Dad. And now I'm just gonna make dinner...” he trailed off, before suddenly smiling a little wider, a star-like sparkle appearing in his eyes. “You wanna help?”

“Dinner? You mean like food?”

“Yeah!”

She eyed the boy critically. She didn't want to be- she wasn't in the mood- she wanted to be alone.

But she also liked food. She liked its sharp tastes, the textures, the weird feeling when her body turned it into a good and it flowed through her body. She wouldn't mind having something to eat, yeah.

Besides. There was something so enthusiastic about the kid's expression. It was pretty hard to turn down.
So, against her better judgement, Amethyst said, “Okay. Sure.”

“Yes!” The boy punched the air, and then led her over to the kitchen with a wave of his hand, grinning at her. “What do you want to eat?”

“Dunno.” She liked eating, but she usually didn't get the chance, and honestly, it was kinda hard to keep track of what food humans ate all the time. It always kept changing, along with their weird, complex rules about what and how you were ‘supposed’ to eat. She thought about some of the food Greg had showed her, and tried to think of one of her favourites. “Can we make pizza?”

The half-human looked thoughtful. “Well,” he said, “We don't have any pizzas in the freezers, and it's kinda late to get one delivered. But we could make mini-pizzas! That's when you get bread, and cover it in ketchup and cheese and stuff, and you put it in a tiny oven!”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” Amethyst reflected. That was the problem with human food. It was tasty, but it took forever to make. It was kind of ridiculous how much of their short lives humans spent making sure they didn't just starve to death.

The boy shook his head. “Nah, it's pretty quick! And we'll make it fun!”

She was skeptical, but she still let the boy lead her to the kitchen fridge, and watched as he carried out ingredients; a loaf of bread in a plastic bag, a huge bottle of ketchup, a block of bright orange cheese, half of an onion, and a round yellow vegetable she didn't recognize. He spread it all out on the counter, standing on his toes to reach it.

“Okay,” he said, opening a drawer and rattling around in it. “The first thing we need to do is chop the onions and the yellow pepper. I'm not really allowed to do that, so you'll have to, okay?”

“Oooh! Cutting things!” Amethyst's eyes lit up as the boy handed her a sharp, bladed knife. Well, not that sharp, but it still had a pretty wicked edge for something not meant for battle. “That's the best part! You know, besides the eating bit. Why aren't you allowed?”

“Pearl's afraid I might get hurt.”

Yeah, that sounded like Pearl. “Oh well,” she said, happily taking the knife from the kid. “Don’t worry. I'll show you how it's done.”

He set her up with a ‘cutting board’, which was apparently Very Important because she wasn't supposed to damage the counter beneath, while he laid out several pieces of bread, and began to spread ketchup on them with his own (significantly duller) knife. Amethyst plunged her own blade into the weird yellow thing- the pepper, she guessed- and then pressed down, cutting it in half. It was filled with all sorts of weird white seeds. Steven then explained how you weren't supposed to eat those, and told her how to separate the core to throw them out. Amethyst wasn't totally sure why you couldn't eat the seeds, but followed the instructions nonetheless, before returning to chopping the pepper with renewed vigour.

By the time she'd finished that off, the boy had gotten a weird metal box-thing out and was rubbing the block of cheese against one of its sides. Amethyst just shrugged and moved onto the onion- she already knew how to do this one, since Greg showed them all at this barbecue he'd had on the beach one time, and she remembered that you had to take off the papery outer layers first. As she cut it into tiny, thin slices, the really fun part began.

Onions: just the smell of them could make humans cry, but they ate them anyway. Amethyst had to admire that, and she would do what she could to honour their ridiculous determination.
The boy noticed when she stopped cutting, and that was doing something strange, so asked, “Amethyst, what are you doing?”

She turned around, face moulded into an exaggerated grimace: “HELP! MY EYES HAVE TURNED INTO ONIONS!”

She had cut out two large slices of onions, and placed them on top of her eyes, tilting her head back so they wouldn't automatically fall off; she could feel the weird burning sensation, not really painful, but making tears begin to well up. She stuck out her tongue, laughing.

“Oh my gosh, I can't believe you!” Rose giggled.

No- not Rose- Steven.

Amethyst jerked forward; the onion slices fell off her face, landing on the kitchen floor. She stared across at the boy in front of her, still smiling, still laughing. He sounded so much like her.

For a second, she'd thought he was Rose Quartz. For a second, she'd forgotten that Rose Quartz was gone, and that he was the reason why.

He laughed just like her.

“Amethyst...?” the boy asked, seeing her expression change. The smile was gone, replaced with concern.

“I...” Amethyst gulped. “I can't...”

She backed away, into the side of the counter. Without looking, her hands pressed against its smooth top; she pushed down, and hoisted herself up and clambered backwards, desperate to get away from the small human. In her hurry, she toppled over the other side, landing on her back. The Gem scrambled to pull herself back to her feet. By the time she succeeded, the boy was already at her side, concern now having morphed into full blown worry.

“Amethyst- what's wrong? -”

“Get away!” she yelled, cutting him off. She didn't need his sympathy, didn't need him being so nice. “I can't.”

She choked on the rest of the words, and turned, shrugging off the hand the boy had reached out to offer; she charged away, vision beginning to blur, which was good because it meant that she didn't have to really look at Rose's portrait hung above the door. She practically ripped said door open. The moment she felt the salt-scented wind hit her face she was already changing, her tears vanishing as her body dissolved into a white glow, before it coalesced into a smaller, lither form-

Amethyst felt her new, powerful wings beat against the air, and the purple owl soared out into the cool night, away from the Temple and the human home built around it.

She liked owls. Always had. They weren't her favourite bird- that award went to crows, which also happened to be the very first animal she'd ever seen, not long after she'd first crawled out of her hole- but owls were a close second. She like how big and menacing they were, with sharp teeth and long talons, but how despite their size they still hardly made a sound as they flew. She liked their huge, staring eyes. She liked the way their heads could turn in a full circle. It was great for freaking humans out.

Finally, she liked how strong she felt in an owl's body.
She glided, letting her long wings catch the air-currents and sail over the sea. Since the sun had set, there weren't a lot of thermals left, but the creature's feathers were so perfectly shaped for night flying that she scarcely needed them. In this form, flying was as easy as summoning her whip; she didn't even need to think about it.

Which *sucked*, actually, because Amethyst kinda wished she had something to distract her. Wished she had some way to ignore the roaring grief that was threatening to drown her.

When Greg had first shown up at the Temple that one night, searching for the 'giant pink haired woman', Amethyst had been over the moon with excitement. It had been nearly a full century since the last time she'd had a chance to *really* interact with humans, especially since all it took to keep this particular crop away was a measly chain-wire fence. That specific human had been different, however. He'd barely freaked out at *all* when she'd started screaming portents of death at him- in fact, when she'd flown away, he'd decided to just climb over the fence and *follow* her.

And even though he'd left, he'd still decided to come back to Temple, singing a song for Rose, asking to see her again...and Rose had agreed. Both Garnet and Pearl had tried to warn her against it ("*you already know how it's going to end*"), but Amethyst had told her friend to go for it and play with the odd human. She'd wanted to know more about this guy; he seemed cool, for his species.

And he *was* cool. He let her play with his long mane of hair, and knew all sorts of funny stories, and would buy all sorts of tasty food for her to try, and he could make *music*. Good music, too, not the boring junk that humans had been playing for the last five-thousand years. This stuff was *electric*; it seemed to shoot straight to the core of her gem-stone, urging her to dance in a way she'd never danced before.

Despite everything, Greg ended up sticking around, long enough that even Pearl had eventually learned his name. And Rose started spending more and more of her time with him. And Amethyst was fine with that at first, because it was fun to tag along; but then Rose had started saying things like, "*Oh, sweetie, it's just me and Greg today*" or "*Why don't you go do something with Garnet instead*?"

It had sparked that old, simmering frustration, the same one that began to build every single time Rose had gone and adopted another human.

But she'd borne it anyway, letting Rose go off with Greg each time with barely a grumble, because what would be the point? Sure, it was frustrating, but sooner or later Greg would be dead, and once again there would be nobody to distract Rose, and keep the older Gem away from her.

She'd felt bad about thinking that, of course, because she *liked* Greg, she really did- but she was just being honest. There was no point in lying about it.

So how was she supposed to feel, then, after being told that hadn't happened at all? That Rose had instead decided to kick the bucket, leaving some stupid human kid behind in her place while the Homeworld was basically sitting on their doorstep, ready to destroy the whole planet and them along with it?

The false owl screeched angrily, her cry echoing across the waves. Amethyst wasn't sure how she was *supposed* to be feeling, but she knew how she felt anyway- *angry*. Angry at Greg, angry at the kid, angry at Pearl, angry at Garnet, angry at *Rose*....

She wished that some corrupted gem-monster would turn up, looking for a fight. Or maybe that that Homeworld Gem (what had Greg called her? Peridot?) would dare to show her ugly green mug, so Amethyst could smash it in. That would feel *great*. And it would solve at least one of their problems,
because Garnet and Pearl clearly didn't know how to solve any of their other ones, and she sure as hell didn't know either.

The Gem surveyed the land below, as if maybe Peridot would just appear out of the blue. She didn't, of course. All that lay beneath her was the glittering network of electric lights, almost mirroring the stars in the sky.

Amethyst regarded the lights with a predatory eye. Even if she couldn't find something to punch, that didn't mean she couldn't find at least some other kind of entertainment...

She tilted her wings, and angled herself to the ground; as she approached, things came into sharper focus, and she aimed herself towards a quiet suburban street. It was almost entirely empty. A single road lamp flickered, casting strange shadows. The mood had been practically set for her. Now, she just needed to wait for some prey.

The first target to appear was a drunk guy, judging by the way he swayed as he walked down the street. Amethyst loved drunk people. The humans' weird habit of drinking stuff that made them barely capable of talking, standing or indeed, thinking, was quite possibly one of the most hilarious things you could find in the entire galaxy. Pearl could go on for hours about the exquisite sculptures and dances of the Homeworld, but as far as Amethyst was concerned, there wasn't a single thing out there that could beat a drunk human for sheer comedy value.

There was no need for subtlety with this one. Amethyst just released an ear-splitting shriek and dove at him straight from above, pulling up just enough so that her talons swept through his hair; the guy threw up his arms, screamed, and nearly landed flat on his face. Amethyst cackled as he fought his way to his feet, and chased the guy all the way down the street, until he finally stumbled into a house which she had to assume was his. If it wasn't, it sure would make for an interesting conversation later.

Next, she found herself in someone's garden- empty aside for the tiny little white mop of a dog. Amethyst could remember back when all dogs were big, handsome things meant for hunting and fighting, and was utterly baffled by the recent habit of humans' to instead breed them into tiny, yappy things. It made no sense, but again, it was an awesome source of amusement. Amethyst would perch above the dog's head, just out of reach; she cawed, jeered, asked if it would like a treat, whipping it into a frenzy. Occasionally she would take flight and circle above it, and the dog would jump up, trying to catch her but invariably missing. The creature made such a racket that eventually one of its humans popped out of the house, trying to discover what was making it freak out. Amethyst hid in the tall trees, snickering to herself when they found nothing. She repeated the cycle a few more times, until the dog was practically out of its mind with frustration, and the owner practically out of their own with anger at their 'misbehaving' mutt.

After the amusement of dog baiting had worn off Amethyst soared back out to the streets. It took her a while to find some more prey; eventually, however, she spotted what looked like some kid, walking home all by themselves late at night.

The great thing about kids was that they basically did half the scaring themselves. All you had to do was set the atmosphere...

So she started off by following them at a distance, occasionally swooping down into so they'd catch a glimpse of her, then letting herself fade into the darkness before they got a proper look at her.

Then came the hooting. Soft, quiet calls, perfect for sending shivers up spines.

Next, the stare. She flew ahead of the human, landing on a mailbox half-hidden in shadow; she
stared out at the human with bright, bold owl eyes, staring, staring, never blinking, just rotating her head as the person passed....

Only, they didn't seem particularly creeped out. They'd clearly seen her; that much was obvious from their many sharp glances. Instead, they just seemed...mildly curious?

That ruffled Amethyst's feathers- literally. She had been scaring humans for a good three-thousand years, and she would not have herself be defeated now! This was a kid who'd clearly seen their fair share of horror films, and wasn't impressed; but all that meant was that she was gonna have to up her game.

There was only one course of action left to her; **dive bomb!**

“Woah!” the human child yelled as they saw the bird diving out of the darkness towards them. They threw up their arms. “*What is with this bird?!”*

Amethyst released a sound that was half-caw, half-cackle, and rose back into the air, ready to dive in again. The human's eyes went wide; they started to sprint. But all they had were tiny little human legs. *She* had an owl's wings, and there was no escaping as she dived in again...

...and as Amethyst rose up, light from one of the street lamps caught her gem, making it sparkle in the darkness. The human saw it.

“...wait a second,” the human called, in a suddenly not-scared voice. “Steven? Is that you?”

If Amethyst hadn't been flying, she would have stopped dead in her tracks. As it was, she instead said, on instinct, “*No!*”

“Oh.” The human walked towards Amethyst, who was now flapping in place. “Er...it's Amethyst, right?”

The Gem flew over to a fire-hydrant to perch, and eyed the human suspiciously, wonder how it knew her name. Now that she was really looking, Amethyst realized that they might not be a kid after all; they were short, which was usually a tell-tale sign, but there was a sort of...maturity on their face that kids didn't usually have. “How did you know?”

The human (the girl? Woman?) shrugged. “I've kinda caught on to the fact that whenever something weird's going on, it's usually because of you guys. And if it wasn't Steven, I just figured that...,” she trailed off, and laughed awkwardly. “Besides, I recognized your voice.”

*Oh,* Amethyst thought. She wondered how many of the humans in Beach City now knew both her name and the sound of her voice.

The human shifted under the uncomfortable, penetrating stare of the owl-shaped alien. “Er...did you need anything?” she asked.

*No,* Amethyst thought, but before she could even begin to unfurl her wings, her beak seemed to open of its own accord, and said, “So you know Steven, then?”

The Gem was shocked by her own question, but the human just seemed mildly surprised. “Er, yeah. Definitely.”

“How?” Again, the words seemed to come from a curious part of herself that Amethyst couldn't quite control.
The girl looked even more baffled by this question, but she answered it nonetheless. “Well, I mean, he hangs out at the Big Donut a lot...but I mean, I guess we hang out other times, too. You know, watch movies and stuff. Oh, and there was that time that I- or I mean, that time we got trapped on that island together for a couple weeks.” She shrugged. “It's weird, I guess, since he's so young, but I'd say we're friends. He's a good kid, you know?”

No, I don't, thought Amethyst. She opened her wings wide, and launched herself away. As she flew off, she heard the human calling out, asking her to wait. Amethyst ignored her.

Any of the good mood she'd managed to find earlier had evaporated. Amethyst wasn't sure why she'd decided to ask the random human about Rose's son; but then, maybe she'd just wanted to hear something about him from someone other than Greg...

It hadn't helped. She didn't want to hear some human go on about how Steven was a 'good kid'.

Amethyst drifted upwards, but there was no heart in her wing-beats; suddenly, she didn't want to fly anymore. Then again, neither did she want to return to the Temple. She didn't know what she wanted.

(No, that wasn't true. She did know. She wanted Rose back.)

Amethyst glided up and away from the street, from the lights, from the city, from the beach, even from the dark, familiar silhouette of the Temple. Beneath her, the waves churned. The dark water suddenly seems very inviting.

She didn't want to fly anymore, but swimming...yeah, she wouldn't mind swimming.

The owl dived down, towards the water. Its shape glowed bright white in the darkness, and grew, expanding into sharp, slender curves. Then it wasn't an owl at all, but a shark; she hit the surface with hardly a splash, slicing through the water like a knife, and Amethyst set off into the black vastness of the ocean.

Chapter End Notes

Me: Okay, so I bet this chapter is going to be pretty short, it won't take long...

Me: *vomits out nearly five-thousand words*

Me: Well, never-mind then.

Thanks for all the support, everybody! You've been a great motivation, not just with this fic, but with my recently finished exams.
Well, this took a little longer than I wanted to get out, since my laptop charger died earlier this week. That said, it didn't take as long as you'd think, because when you don't have things like 'Tumblr' and 'YouTube videos' to distract you, it gives you a lot of time to focus on writing, even if it is with such archaic instruments such as paper and pens.

In the Temple's Heart, Garnet paced.

Occasionally, she would pause, apparently staring at nothing. This was not true. Behind her visor, her third eye opened, and it Saw.

She did this for hours, pacing and Seeing. Sometimes, during her constant circulation of the room, she would pause to bend down, pick up and inspect a green shard- the single piece of shrapnel from the collected spaceship wreckage that had been left behind when Pearl had gone off into her own room to study the rest. It was not a large piece, scarcely longer than Garnet's forearm, light and shiny and incredibly strong. Indeed, strength appeared to have been its main purpose, for it contained no electrical wiring or magical matrices; Pearl hypothesized that it had belonged to the ship's hull, designed to withstand not just the high pressures of entry into planets' atmospheres, but bombardment from enemy combatants. Purely in terms of what kind of information the Crystal Gems could gleam from it, however, it was practically useless.

It was not useless to Garnet, however. To her, it served as an anchor. Proof that all of this was real; proof that she hadn't merely gotten lost in some long, distant Future Vision, and mistaken some tangential possibility as reality. It was not the only proof, of course, but it was the most concrete, the most tangible. When she held that spaceship shard in her hand, cold and jagged against one of her gems, Garnet knew it was truly real.

She held the shrapnel up once more, then cupped it in both hands and enveloped it in a red bubble. The Gem let the bubble float up- but not too far, to ensure that this particular specimen did not get lost in their now quite sizeable collection of bubbled gemstones.

After a long moment of deliberation, she strode forward. As she walked, an archway appeared in the wall in front of her. The wall split apart into three pieces, which retreated, allowing Garnet to step through the portal and out of the Temple.

It was dark outside- though 'outside' was perhaps no longer a fitting description, because it was now enclosed in a human structure. Neither was it entirely dark. Moon and starlight filtered through the new house's windows, while tiny green and red lights glittered from random human electrical devices, providing more than enough light for the Gem to see by. She surveyed the room with her two normal eyes, but did not see who she was looking for; she reached out with her gemstones, but neither sensed the presence she had hoped to find. But then, she hadn't really expected them to. Stifling her frustration, Garnet began to make her way to the house's exit, taking care to ensure that her feet fell lightly on the floor.

They were not light enough, it seemed, because she had barely made it halfway across the room before a soft voice called, “Garnet?”
She stopped, and looked up at the speaker. It was Steven, who was peering down at her from the second level.

“Are you looking for Amethyst?” he asked.

“Yes,” Garnet replied.

“She left a couple of hours ago,” the boy said, jerking his head towards the door. “I don’t know where she went, though.” He hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Do you?”

The Gem gave herself some time to evaluate her options, then said, “No.”

“Oh.”

The child didn't say anything else. But he wanted to. Garnet could feel it. The weight of those unsaid words seemed to press against the both of them, so heavy that the fusion could almost make out their shape.

And that shape surprised her. *He knows about Future Vision, Garnet thought. He's surprised that I can't just See where Amethyst is.*

It wasn't a surprise that Garnet shared, as she knew how limited her abilities could be at times. What did surprise her, however, was the fact that Steven apparently knew about her Future Vision at all. The boy was so young. Surely too young and immature to comprehend or cope with the idea of a thousand, multitudinous futures, spreading out in every direction? Surely too young that she would have placed the burden of that knowledge upon him?

But she must have told him; there was no other explanation for the long, heavy look he was giving her. Perhaps she hadn't even just told him, but *shown* him.

...no. Surely not. Steven was just a half-human child. Garnet would have not passed her powers onto him, not even for a moment. She never even granted those abilities to Pearl or Amethyst. The only one she truly trusted to bear Future Vision in her stead was Rose Quartz—

—whose gem was now carried by that half-human child.

So perhaps the child had carried Future Vision in the past. Perhaps Garnet had felt him ready for that responsibility. Perhaps the situation had become so dire that there had been no alternative. Perhaps, therefore, if she'd answered his unspoken question, he would have understood the explanation. Perhaps she could have told him that there were too many possible futures, too many unknown variables, that every possible timeline she saw was vague and short-lived. That ever since she had found out about the missing thirteen years, she had felt practically blind.

But she didn't.

So instead there was a long, uneasy silence.

“Are you going to go look for her?” Steven eventually asked, eyes again flickering towards the door.

Garnet looked away from the boy, and stared at the doorway which lead down to the beach, before answering, “No.”

Garnet had thought she might, when she'd left the Temple— but what would be the point? The behaviours of her friends were usually so regular, so *predictable*— there was a certainty born out of thousands of years of companionship. But grief had made Amethyst wild and unpredictable, and
there was no real telling where the Gem was, or what she was doing. She could be flying, or swimming, or stealing a car, or merely walking along the beach. It could take hours, days, to find her, and in most cases, if or when Garnet did, Amethyst would simply run away again. Garnet did not want to just chase her off. It would be best to let Amethyst return in her own time.

Garnet could have left then. She could have turned around, and walked back into the Temple, not needing to say another word. But instead she looked back at the boy, who was still watching her with wide eyes.

“I thought humans slept at night,” Garnet remarked, though it was more of a question.

“Yeah. Usually,” Steven said.

Behind her glasses, Garnet raised an eyebrow. “I'm sorry if I woke you.”

“You didn't. Don't worry,” the boy muttered, looking down.

Garnet would have liked not to worry, but that wasn't an option. Steven carried her dear friend's gem, which meant that organic body or not, he was a Crystal Gem, just as he had proclaimed earlier that day. Which meant that he was their responsibility. And since Rose Quartz was gone, that made Garnet their leader, which made him her responsibility, specifically- whether she felt up to the task or not.

“Are you having difficulty sleeping?” she asked.

“No...I mean,” he said, suddenly embarrassed. “I'm just- I'm just working on something. I thought that it might- well, I think it might help you guys get your memory back?”

Was he working on some kind of spell? Or some sort of memory-restoring instrument? Though Garnet was skeptical that he could have thought of something that she and the other Gems hadn't, it couldn't hurt to see what ideas he had. “Show me.”

“Uh, okay. Sure. Just- just stay there, okay?” He hurried away from the ledge, and Garnet could hear him trooping around, shifting objects. After a couple moments, he appeared at the top of the stairs, arms full; Garnet was afraid that between the weight and the darkness, the boy may have slipped as he came down, but he navigated the stairway quite easily. Nonetheless, when arrived on the bottom floor, he dropped his load on the couch, before switching on a lamp.

“Okay,” Steven said, blinking rapidly in the sudden brightness. “I think this stuff might be able to jog your memories. I've got things for Amethyst and Pearl, too, but we'll just try it on you first, okay? Come look!”

She came to stand awkwardly besides the boy as he took an item from the pile and held it up to her to see. It was a black-brown object, slightly larger than her fist, shaped similarly to a brick, but with rounded edge and two little triangles on the top. There were two pink dots on one side which reminded Garnet vaguely of eyes, and she suspected that it may have been a stylistic representation of some kind of animal- a cat, perhaps?

“This is my Cookie Cat clock,” Steven told her solemnly, confirming her suspicions.

Garnet looked at the object, and mentally compared it to the various clocks that Greg had previously shown her. They had come in a variety of forms- some tall, some round, some with little hands which constantly turned in circles, others with blinking displays, but all of them had had numbers involved. This object did not. “It doesn't look like a clock,” she said.
“That's because it's not plugged in, so it's off,” he said. “But the clock part isn't the important bit, anyway. Do you remember this at all?” Garnet shook her head, so the boy launched into an explanation about how 'Cookie Cat' was some kind of food product that the boy loved. “About a year ago they stopped making them, though, so you- and Amethyst, and Pearl- you went and bought every single Cookie Cat you could get your hands on, just for me! And it was so awesome! And then my gem started glowing, and I summoned my shield for the first time!”

“You have Rose's shield, then?” Garnet asked. She had suspected as much, but it was good to have confirmation.

“Yeah,” said Steven. “I kinda have trouble making it appear, though. I'm a lot better with bubbles!

“Anyway,” he said, returning to subject of the confectionery-animal-shaped clock, “All the Cookie Cats were kinda destroyed by this monster, so I never got the chance to eat them...I was pretty bummed. So to cheer me up, you got me this!”

“...I see,” the Gem said. Already the boy had rushed back to the sofa, and was grabbing something else to show her.

“You also got me this!” he announced, proudly holding out an object. In his soft, tiny hands, it did not look like much. Garnet wondered if there to it than first appearance suggested, but when she took it from his hands and inspected more closely, she discovered that her initial guess had indeed proved correct.

It was a rock.

It was a very ordinary Earth rock, the kind which could easily be found almost anywhere on the planet. It was not particularly large, nor particularly small. It was vaguely smooth and oblong in shape. It was dull grey in colour. It did not appear interesting or special in any way.

“It's a rock,” Garnet said simply, unsure of what else she could say.

“Yeah!” Steven agreed, grinning broadly. “You gave it to me as a present!”

Garnet blinked. She could not imagine why she would have thought an ordinary rock would have made a good present, especially considering how many other, more interesting toys the boy already appeared to have. However, she must have had good reason to, since the boy appeared to love it. Perhaps it was some human tradition she was unaware of?

“...is any of this ringing any bells?” Steven asked, suddenly seeming anxious when she said nothing else.

It wasn't. But perhaps that wasn't because of a flaw in the concept itself, but rather the execution; perhaps she simply hadn't been shown the right kind of object yet. “Keep going,” she therefore told the boy, neatly side-stepping his question.

“Uh...okay...” Steven took the rock back from her, returned it to the pile, and retrieved something else. This object was easily identifiable as a photograph of herself and a younger-looking Steven walking along the beach, framed by wood. She inspected the picture; she tried to place herself in the scene. She could easily imagine herself by the shore- she had walked along it more times than she could count, and it was not hard to imagine the sea breeze brushing against her skin, or feel her feet sinking into the soft sand. It was far harder, however, to imagine this child next to her, his tiny hand in hers. It was just a picture, though an admittedly quite pretty one; it stirred no feelings of familiarity inside of her.
Perhaps that was merely because it *was* so generic? For centuries she had walked this beach, and so even with the inclusion of Steven, the picture was not distinctive enough to awaken any specific memories.

She explained the problem to Steven, who nodded thoughtfully. “I get it,” he said, “and I think I have just the thing!”

This time, when Steven rushed back from the couch, he returned with a small, hand-held device which was black in colour. However, when he pressed a button, one of the sides changed so that it was no longer black, but instead lit up to display a photograph of himself with his arms wrapped around what appeared to be another human child. He swiped a finger across this screen, and the picture disappeared, replaced with numerous tiny symbols that Garnet could not even begin to guess the meanings of. The boy motioned for her to come closer; the Gem squatted down on her haunches, and the boy came to stand between her legs, and guided one of her hands to the screen.

“Pictures!” he said cheerfully, and Garnet surmised that the object must be some kind of camera, though it was far more advanced and sleek than the ones she had previously seen. To navigate, the user merely had to drag their hand across the screen, flicking from one display to the next. It appeared to be a very intuitive interface, enough that by the time Steven had navigated to the 'Photo-Gallery', he trusted that she would be capable of navigating the menu herself. With a simple flick of her finger, she could make a new picture glide into place on the screen.

“These are some pictures I took on a mission of couple days ago,” he said, referring to a couple blurry photographs of what seemed to be a dark, gloomy Gem temple, one which Garnet was fairly sure had been a minor base of operations during the war. “Ooh, that's the cake I ate a while back- it was really tasty- oh, and that's when Amethyst stole my phone,” he said, explaining a sequence of photos that involved the purple Gem making ridiculous expressions right at the lens while Steven could be seen chasing her in the background. “And- yep, here,” he said, having her pause in her swiping. This particular photograph had a strange green tint to it, and unlike the others, it was incredibly busy; it featured not just herself, Steven, and the other Crystal Gems, but three other humans of indeterminate age. The seven of them were all staring at the camera with various expressions of joy, boredom and confusion, with strange glittery symbols and writing superimposed on top. After a moment, Garnet continued to flick through, finding more pictures in the same vein. There was various shots of the humans and the Gems making odd, goofy faces at the camera, or standing in strange poses against a background of unnaturally green corn. Even Pearl appeared to have been roped in; though in the early photos she seemed ill at ease, as the sequence progressed, she began to smile, grinning broadly at the camera while she held Steven in her arms.

“That girl next to Amethyst is Jenny, and that's Sour Cream, and that's Buck!” Steven explained, pointing at each of the humans in turn. “He told me that he started wearing glasses like yours because he saw you with them around town, and thought they were awesome. They're all super cool! They, uh, helped us find Peridot's escape pod, and then we all took selfies together!”

Garnet stared long and hard at the pictures, trying to dredge up some sense of familiarity.

“...this isn't working, is it?” he asked, the enthusiasm having faded from his voice.

“No,” said Garnet, with genuine sorrow. “It's not.”

They were both quiet for a moment, before the boy reached up, and took the device from her hand. He turned it off, yet continued to stare at the now blank screen. “I really thought that would help,” he sniffed as the Gem stood up again. “It almost always worked on the TV...”

Garnet was conflicted. A large part of her- mostly Ruby, she was sure- wanted to reach out to
So instead she asked, “Does TV have any other suggestions for restoring memories?”

(Garnet hadn’t even realized that humans apparently told stories about memory loss, and she rather doubted that those stories would be particularly accurate or helpful, but surely it was still worth asking?)

The boy looked up at her. “Well, sometimes it helps if characters get hit really hard on the head.”

“Hmm.”

“But I don’t think that would work very well with you guys,” he said, a small smile playing at his lips.

“No,” Garnet agreed, though she did not smile in return. “I don’t think it would.”

Then, after a moment, she added stiffly, “Good try, though.”

It was...awkward, after that. Garnet didn’t know what to say, and it appeared that Steven didn’t either. Eventually, she simply asked that he keep an eye out for Amethyst, and retreated back into the Temple, almost ashamed by the relief she felt upon doing so. Once inside, she hesitated for a moment, before making her way to Pearl’s room.

Garnet paused at the edge of the pool, water from the magical fountains lapping lightly against the edge. At the top of the largest, most central fountain stood Pearl, the various pieces of shape-ship wreckage suspended in the air, orbiting around her. The Gem herself was scrutinizing a smaller piece with sharp, analytic eyes, and was so engrossed in her work that she hadn’t even noticed that Garnet had entered the room. Neither did she notice when Garnet walked across the surface of the bottom-most pool, or even when the larger Gem jumped upwards to land on the water platform besides her, causing a fairly significant splash.

“Pearl,” Garnet finally said, realizing that it was the only way to gain her friend’s attention.

The other Gem jumped slightly at the sound of her voice. “Oh, Garnet! There you are! Did you have any luck finding Amethyst?”

“No,” the fusion admitted.

Pearl scowled. “I can’t believe she would just run off like that...!” She glowered intensely at the shape-ship fragment in her hand, though it was obviously only a convenient substitute for the real subject of her ire. “Not that it matters. It’s not as though she’s been any help.”

“Pearl.”

“What? She hasn’t.”

“Amethyst is just under a lot of pressure right now.”

Pearl’s hand curled into a fist. “So? We all are.”

Garnet took a step forward, and rested a hand on the smaller Gem’s shoulder. She opened her third eye, and saw multiple ways the next part of the conversation could play out; she chose the most peaceful one. Usually Garnet tried not to use Future Vision for such trivial things, but at this point,
she needed all the help she could get. “I know,” Garnet said. “But we all have our own ways of
coping. This is Amethyst's. Besides, you know she could never do the work you're doing...”

Pearl's cheeks flushed pale blue at the subtle praise. “It's nothing,” she murmured. “I've studied Gem
technology extensively, after all...” Suddenly, the frustration returned to her face. “Not that it matters
much. The ship was so damaged that I can barely recover any data from its wreckage, and I can
scarcely make heads or tails of what little I can. The technology is so far beyond anything I've ever
seen before... Maybe if I'd gotten the chance to interface with it when it was whole, and had context
to this data... but as is, it's practically useless...”

Garnet frowned. “Did you leave any notes?”

“A few,” said Pearl; she waved her hand, and from the water rose a few pieces of papers, all
perfectly dry and covered in complex equations and diagrams. “It appears that I had made quite a bit
of progress, but I must have had a lot more information to draw upon, because I don't know where
half of the variables written here came from! It would have so wonderful if I'd just written it down,
but of course I didn't. What would have been the point?” she asked, voice dripping with irony as she
tapped the large white gem on her forehead. “I have perfect memory for these kinds of things.”

Garnet knew that there was nothing she could say to comfort her friend on this point, so she simply
gave Pearl's shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Pearl sighed, head drooping. Then suddenly she asked, “What's that in your hand?”

Garnet looked down, following the other Gem's gaze; she finally noticed that she was still holding
the picture-frame in her other hand. She hadn't even realized that she hadn't given it back to the boy
before she had left.

She held the frame out to Pearl, flipping it over so that the photograph could clearly be seen. “Steven
hoped that seeing it would help me retrieve my memories.”

Pearl stared at the photograph, and Garnet took it as a chance to give the picture a proper, second
look as well. It depicted her and the half-human boy, walking down the beach, hand-in-hand, though
the boy was so much smaller than her that he had needed to stretch his arm well above his head in
order to do so. He gazed up at her with clear adoration, while a small, fond smile played on Garnet's
own lips as she gazed down at the boy. The picture appeared to have been taken quite early in the
morning, judging by the pale pinks and oranges that bathed the scene. The photographer, whoever it
had been, had truly captured a sense of peaceful serenity.

Pearl's face was impassive as she regarded the photograph- for the most part. Garnet noticed the
slightest creases form around the Gem's eyes, a slight wrinkling of the nose.

It was distaste. Well hidden distaste, but distaste, nonetheless.

“He seems quite... nice,” Garnet said, in a voice which she kept as neutral as possible.

“I'm sure he is,” said Pearl, shrugging off the hand of Garnet's which had still been resting on her
shoulder.

Garnet let the hand drop, but she was not about to leave the matter there. “You should try talking to
him,” she suggested. “I think he's worried about you.”

“He shouldn't be.” Pearl apparently returned her focus to the shard of advanced Gem-tech in her
hands. Garnet frowned at her as her friend pretended to resume her work.
Silence stretched, filled only by the sound of roar of water all around them.

“You loved him,” Garnet eventually said, in a very quiet voice. “He has pictures of you two together. It's obvious.”

Pearl went very still.

“Maybe I did,” she finally said, not looking up. “In which case, I would rather do what I can to get our memories back, instead of wasting time chatting.”

Garnet forced herself not to comment about how the space-ship had nothing to do with their missing memories, and that the working on its remains was unlikely to help restore them. She didn't even need Future Vision to know that such a comment would do nothing but antagonize Pearl. No, there was something far more important that needed to be asked.

“And what if we never do get those memories back?”

“That won't happen.”

“It's a possibility.”

“It not,” Pearl said, meeting Garnet's gaze squarely. “We have a plan.”

“A risky one. One with no guarantee of success.”

Pearl took a long, deep breath- a habit she'd picked up from the humans several centuries ago, and which she only did when she was truly, truly strained. “It will work. I will make certain of it. If Rose Quartz is truly gone, then there is not a single memory of her which I will allow myself to forget. Do you understand?”

Garnet stared. Then, she nodded.

She began to walk away. At the edge of the fountain, gazing down at the pool of water below, she froze. She wanted to look back at her friend, and tell her, 'You can't blame him'.

She wanted to say it, but the problem was, she, and Ruby, and Sapphire- well, they weren't sure if they entirely believed those words themselves.

oOoOoOo

As she sped across the ocean floor, water racing past her smooth scales, Amethyst allowed herself, however briefly, to forget. She let herself shed the grief, and the fear, and the anger, and the guilt; let herself replace all that with the peaceful simplicity of a shark.

She rode on currents. She swam past seaweed, past coral, through ancient human ship-wrecks. She listened to the distant calls of a pod of whales; she felt the twitching pulse of electricity from passing fish; she tasted the coppery tang of blood on the water. The taste woke a hunger inside of her- not for food, since she didn't need nor want to eat, especially not plain, raw fish when humans knew so many ways of making flavours more interesting. No, tasting that blood, strong and sharp despite miles of distance, woke a hunger for the hunt. So she gnashed her mighty jaws and chased after fish, sending schools scattering in a bright, beautiful dance of silver scales as they desperately tried to escape the fearsome predator.

She lost herself like that for a while- how long, it was hard to tell, but it couldn't have been more than a few hours, she was sure. Finally, though, Amethyst felt some new, different sense tugging at her,
pulling her out of the illusion she had bathed herself in. At first she thought it was merely the warmth of the morning sun, as pale streams of sunlight began filtering through the waves overhead...but no, that wasn't it at all. This wasn't eyesight, or taste, or electropereception, or any other sense that could be produced by her illusionary body; this was something from her gemstone- a tugging awareness at the back of her mind, telling her that another Gem- or Gems- were nearby...

The shark slowed, and began to drift in circles, while Amethyst tried to place the sense more specifically. It wasn't anyone she knew- she would have recognized Pearl or Garnet immediately. She was glad it wasn't them- she was not in the mood. But she was puzzled about where else the feeling could be coming from. Had she stumbled across some old gem-artifact which had somehow become submerged beneath the water thousands of years earlier? Or maybe there was some Gem monster nearby, and the two of them had accidentally happened to cross paths?

Amethyst hoped it was the latter. She'd like the chance to really sink her teeth into something.

She was just contemplating how fun it would be, trying to take down a corrupted monster using nothing but a shark's body, no whips or nuthin', when suddenly she felt something moving beneath her. It caused a huge wave, one so strong that it pushed her back. Startled, Amethyst twisted her body to try to get a proper look downwards, to see what could possibly causing such a disruption.

It turned out that the sea-floor was moving.

No- not the sea-floor. Amethyst had merely assumed it was the sea-floor, because, of course, what else would it be? But now that daylight was growing brighter, it became increasingly clear that the colour was wrong- not a dull grey or brown at all, but a bright, jet green. And those weren't rocky outcroppings, but legs. And that pale white mass, fluttering gently in the ocean current, that wasn't seaweed or kelp- it was hair.

It wasn't the sea-floor. It was a Gem. An absolutely massive Gem.

Suddenly, the Gem's head rose, and her eyes split open, four orbs of intense green light, staring right up at Amethyst. And finally, the Gem's huge mouth opened, revealing glittering teeth. And she spoke.

“Well, well,” she said, not just with one voice, nor two, but three; they all spoke in near perfect synchronization, the words reverberating through the water, making Amethyst shudder. "Who do we have here?"
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter includes the description and exploration of an abusive/unhealthy relationship.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If Amethyst had had hands at that moment that the fusion spoke, she would have instinctively gone to cover her ears.

It wouldn't have helped to block the sound, of course- Amethyst recognized that instantly. The fusion wasn't speaking in the traditional sense: she wasn't using vocal chords. Instead, the very water seemed to vibrate- and not in the way it usually did, radiating outwards from the sound's source. Rather, all the water was vibrating, quivering, giving the sensation that the words were coming from everywhere simultaneously, so loud that Amethyst swore she could feel it in her very gem. Around her, fishes fled in fright.

Amethyst didn't flee. Instead, she just glared down at the fusion below, wary and ready for a fight.

She vaguely remembered Greg talking about this. He'd given them the full story about the reappearance of the Homeworld Gems, and Amethyst had tried to pay attention, she really had, but it had been tough focusing on anything after the bombshell of Rose's death had broke. A giant hand had come from space and nearly killed them all- big whoop. They had survived, hadn't they? Rose was the one who was dead, not them.

But still, she could dimly remember the human talking about how two of the enemy Gems had fused- or were they both enemies? That didn't seem quite right, but whatever. The warrior, some big hotshot from Homeworld, had convinced the other one to fuse with her, so they could use their combined power to destroy the Crystal Gems- but the smaller one, Lapis, had turned that power against the other, and used it to drag the two of them, still fused into a single body, beneath the sea.

At the time, Amethyst had simply thought that the whole thing sounded sick, and then she'd promptly pushed the matter to the back of her mind. She'd had more important stuff to deal with. It was only now, confronted with the massive fusion at the bottom of the ocean, that Amethyst realized that maybe she should have paid more attention to Greg's story.

“No gloating?” the fusion asked, when Amethyst didn't speak. “I- w- I would have thought you'd have come to gloat.”

Amethyst's shark-tail lashed side-to-side, stirring up the water. Now she kind of regretted taking on a body that had to keep moving forward. It made it pretty hard to keep the fusion in her sights.

She still didn't say a word, much to the other Gem's frustration.

“Why are you here?!” the fusion suddenly shouted, somehow even louder than before- the sudden burst in volume mostly coming from only one of the fusion's three voices, this one rising above the others. “We're not leaving! YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!”
“Woah, chill,” Amethyst muttered, her voice sounding incredibly small and muted compared to the mighty fusion's.

The Gem's huge head rose towards her like a snake's, her eyes narrowing, though one set lagged slightly behind the other. “Chill? Do you intend to freeze me, little Amethyst?” Her mouth twisted into a savage smile. “That would be a clever strategy, but even the strongest of your model doesn't have such a power, let alone a weakling like you.”

OK, Amethyst wasn't going to take an insult like that lying down. “Hey! Who're ya calling a weakling?” she called, barring her rows of sharp teeth.

“I AM!” the fusion said, with a bark-like laugh as loud as a tsunami. “Or have you forgotten how easily I beat you, both times? We weren't even fused then, and we still crushed you...”

Maybe that was true- Amethyst didn't know one way or another. But it didn't matter if it was. “I'm not the one stuck at the bottom of the ocean!”

“Oh, aren't you?”

It dawned on Amethyst that it now might be a good time to start swimming away.

She didn't get the chance.

“This forsaken planet's ocean may be my prison,” the fusion snarled, another one of her voices growing louder, and suddenly the water felt very thick, “but nobody said we couldn't have another inmate.”

And then the water around Amethyst wasn't just thick, it was practically solid, gripping her as tightly as steel- even tighter, because the Gem could have easily snapped steel, but as she twisted and thrashed, the water's hold only seemed to grow stronger. It condensed into a miniature current, one twisted into the shape of a fist, its fingers clamped around the purple shark in an inescapable grip. Then the 'hand' rose, lifting her up, gaining momentum- before it slammed Amethyst down onto the seabed with the force of a waterfall.

The shock of the impact broke the Gem's grip on her form- it glowed brightly for a moment, before Amethyst's default body fell back into place with a grunt of pain.

She fought through that pain. She was a warrior, and she would not let herself get stuck down there. Amethyst knew she was too shaken to take on another shape as complex as a shark's, but she was an excellent shape-shifter, and other, smaller modifications were still within her ability. A pure purple light shone from her gem: her hands and feet lengthened while webbing stretching between her toes and fingers, then her body stretched and lengthened, become more streamlined, better suited for swimming.

Not that swimming would be an option, because in the scant seconds the transformation took, the fusion had already reached out, and pinned her down underneath a slab of water.

“Do you really think I'm going to let you escape?” the fusion asked, crawling forward on legs that had the awkward proportions of arms. “It's your fault I'm down here!”

Suddenly, the fusion froze, eyes swivelling upward. “No,” she muttered, now with only two voices, jerking forward, “it's not her fault, it's yours-”

“But there is no yours,” she told herself, the third voice rejoining the other two. “There's only us,
"You're not me!" The screech sent shock-waves through the water; it was only one speaker this time, angry and desperate. "You're not- I'm Jasper- you can't-"

Even as she struggled to break free, Amethyst couldn't help but listen to the monologue/dialogue-hybrid with awed horror.

The fusion seemed to choke on her own words, jerking forward again. Amethyst felt the pressure bearing down on her lessen, just a bit. Her instincts were telling her to bolt; but a voice in her head, one which spoke with Rose's measured tones, was telling her to wait. She still couldn't break free, and all she'd do was alert the enemy- if she waited, maybe her captor would slip up-

"I'm me," the fusion said, in a voice which would have been called a whisper if it couldn't be heard for miles. "I'm me!" she said again, louder, more definitive.

Then the fusion's attention turned back to Amethyst, who was still caught like a fish in a net- but thankfully, she didn't seem to notice how loose that net had become. Instead, she merely leaned in closer, her white fangs glinting as she smiled. "I have a name now, you know," she said. As she spoke, two of her voices- the original components' voices, Amethyst was sure- had faded to a whisper, leaving the fusion's own as the dominant one. It felt like the rasp of hot sand against skin. "It took me a while to think of one, but I finally decided on a name. I'm Malachite."

"Malachite," the fusion repeated, as if tasting the name, savouring it. "What do you think of it, little Amethyst?"

Amethyst simply glared.

Amethyst had seen plenty of fusions during the war- and since then, she'd even participated in a handful of them herself. And never, never, had she seen any like this one. The body alone was...wrong. Amethyst had known that almost immediately. All Gems have a basic shared body plan, one remarkably similar to humans in form; two arms, two legs, a single head. As a species, they didn't like to deviate from it very much, despite being shape-shifters. Fusions were the exceptions to this rule. All but the most perfect ones, the ones created through complete synchronization and fuelled by the purest love of their components- fusions so rare as to practically be nonexistent- all of them had extra bits. Additional arms, usually, but things like extra eyes, or mouths, or even faces were common also, especially in the multiple-layer fusions.

Those extra bits were part of the reason why fusions were so frowned upon back at the Homeworld- but Amethyst had never found them 'ugly' or 'wrong' or anything. She thought they were cool. First off, they were useful. How many times had an extra arm helped out in a sticky situation? And that wasn't even touching upon the sheer awesomeness that was Garnet's third eye. But it was more than that, too; it was that those extra body parts felt cool. Amethyst could remember the fusions she'd been, could remember the sheer power that came from being that big, bigger than any Gem could be on their own. Being a fusion was all about being more- more body parts included.

That said? Looking at this fusion- this 'Malachite'- Amethyst thought she might finally understand other Gems' revulsion.

It just...it just looked wrong. It wasn't just that she had four sets of arms; it was that two of those sets functioned as legs, twisted into a place that they never should be. It wasn't just that she had four eyes; it was that sometimes those eyes seemed to move separately, as if there wasn't just one person staring out of them, but several. Sure, you got that feeling with almost every fusion, sometimes, but never
this strongly. It wasn't just that she had multiple voices; it was that those multiple voices argued with each other, filled with such hatred and venom. Honestly, at this point, Malachite almost looked more like a corrupted monster than a person.

Not that it really mattered at this point, Amethyst thought ruefully. Monsters could still be dangerous, and this one had her trapped.

“No answer?” Malachite purred when Amethyst didn't respond- although honestly, she thought that such a description was almost an insult to cats. “You were so mouthy before...

“Oh, well,” the fusion said, apparently enjoying the sound of her own voice(s). She must have been relishing having someone new to talk to. “We'll have plenty to time to chat. I'm sure you'll speak up eventually.”

If she got stuck down there (Which I won't, Amethyst reminded herself), then she swore she wouldn't speak once, just to spite them.

“Oh, yes, we'll be down here for a long time,” continued Malachite. She had pushed her massive form off of the seafloor, and was now swimmingly leisurely above Amethyst, who remained pinned to the rocky ground. Her limbs moved like an alligator's- not gracefully, but with power nonetheless, and surety. “Even I don't know how long. It will be interesting to find out how long we can last. I wonder...when is this solar system's star due to expand? It will probably be a few billion years, at least, until the oceans begin to boil.

“Maybe the other Crystal Gems will come looking for you. Maybe they'll even manage to find you.” Malachite grinned up at the sea's surface, the sunlight which filtered through the choppy waves dancing on her face. “Then we'll just trap them here with you. Won't that be fun? It'll practically be a party.

“Or maybe they'll never find you at all. They'll wonder where you went; they'll search, and search, and eventually...they'll give up. They'll probably all be so sad...”

Malachite looked down at her, and to Amethyst's surprise, she was the one looking sad. That, and almost surprised at her own sadness.

“...even Steven.”

The mighty fusion froze, one set of her eyes narrowing even while the other opened wide. “Steven wouldn't like this.”

“So?” Malachite asked herself, the voice which belonged to Jasper gaining prominence again. “That's the point.”

“No, it's not,” the fusion said, and this time the dominant voice was the lighter and sweeter of the three. Lapis.

Pressing her webbed hands against the rocky ground beneath, Amethyst managed to push herself upwards, ever so slightly. The pressure against her was breaking, weakening.

“Come on,” Malachite muttered- and it was a mutter, a private, internal conflict she was having with herself, something she wasn't meaning to broadcast to the entire ocean. “Do you really think Rose Quartz cares that much? What does it matter to her if she loses another soldier? She's already lost so many.”

Amethyst tensed, a new, different anger rising within her.
“But-”

“No buts,” Malachite snapped, cutting herself off. “This is Rose Quartz, leader of the Crystal Gems. It was because of her that you were kept captive on this planet for so long! She is a general. A warrior. Ruthless.”

OK, Amethyst had played nice. Stayed quiet. Waited. But now this twisted freak was insulting Rose Quartz- her teacher, her mentor. And once more, they were acting like- they thought that-

“Steven isn't Rose!” Amethyst shouted, almost without meaning to.

The very ocean seemed to freeze.

“No,” Malachite said at last, although Malachite's own voice was just an echo to the words. This was Lapis. “He's not. He's my friend. And he wouldn't want me to do this.”

And like a wave crashing against a rocky shore, the watery grip around Amethyst broke, and she was off.

Malachite's scream was all around her; Amethyst tried to block it out as she swam, kicking, kicking, rising towards the surface with as much speed as she could muster, knowing that this might be her only chance, that she had to get away....

She could still hear the words, however; she could still hear the screaming, and the thrashing, so great that it was practically forming a whirlpool, one so powerful that it threatened to pull everything into its angry maw. “NO!” Jasper shouted with Malachite; “YOU WON'T TAKE THIS FROM ME!”

Amethyst was almost there- almost at the surface-

She risked a glance back; it was almost as though she couldn't help herself. What she saw made her wish she hadn't looked. Malachite was reaching up, up towards her with her arm, a liquid replica beginning to form even as another arm was reaching out to pull the first one back. Worst, though, was the being's skin. Before, it had been as smooth as polished stone; now it bubbled, like water was boiling just beneath its surface, ready to explode at any moment. The triangular gemstone at the centre of the fusion's face glowed bright, an ugly mixture of both green and orange light. Occasionally a bubble on the monster's skin would grow so large that it almost threatened to split it apart, dissolving the fusion- but then some force of will would shove it back into place, holding it together, even as the rest of the body still writhed-

“YOU DO WHAT I WANT,” the fusion yelled at herself, its voice rising to drown out both of her components', “BECAUSE YOU. ARE. ME. I AM MALAC-”

Not letting herself waste another single second, Amethyst propelled herself through the water's surface- into the air- away from the water, she had to get away-

Her gemstone glowed, her body morphing and shrinking as new wings spread out, and Amethyst the seagull took flight, carrying herself up and far, far away from the water. As she gazed back down at the surface below, the tips of some of the waves on the surf almost looked like fingers, reaching up into the air. Amethyst told herself she was just imagining it. (She still gave her wings another powerful flap, and launched herself still farther away).

She breathed heavily, even though she didn't need any air. Some things just required heavy breathing. “That was close.”
Too close, she didn't say. Because she’d been in ugly situations before. This hadn't been worst than any of those. It certainly hadn't been as bad as those last days of the war. So what, if she'd been all alone, at the bottom of the ocean? So what, if that fusion could have easily trapped her there for all of eternity? So what, if the only thing that had saved her had been that fusion's own lack of cohesiveness? So what, if she’d only managed to escape because one half of that fusion had decided to let her go, out of care for Steven?

No. No. Her thoughts were not going there. They were not. Amethyst briefly closed her eyes as she sailed, letting herself feel the warm sun against her feathers. She'd done it. She'd gotten free.

Right then, all she cared about- all she wanted- was getting back home to the Temple.

Chapter End Notes

A shorter chapter this time, mostly because I realized that if I paired this part with something else the chapter would probably ending up being way TOO long. Not to mention, I kind of feel it's more powerful on its own.

You know, when I started out this story, I did not expect to end up giving Amethyst this much focus. Next up will be some Pearl POV, I promise.
Chapter Notes

Hey everybody! Sorry for the long wait between chapters. I had actually planned for this to go up last Thursday; I had everything written up, and it just needed for me to go in and do some editing but then...it got deleted.

Yeah. I don't know how, but I lost it. Tried everything to get it back, but whatever happened, that chapter could NOT be recovered. So I had to re-write it, and it was a little tough finding the motivation to do so. But finally, it's finished, and we'll just say that the chapter going up today is a belated Mother's Day gift in honour of the Mom Squad.

When Pearl felt the familiar tingle of Amethyst's presence resonating within her, signifying that the other Gem had finally returned to the Temple, she immediately swept down from her platform and rode a water-fall into the cavern below, fully intending to let Amethyst feel the full force of her anger and frustration. Yet the moment she saw her friend's expression—half hidden behind her new mane of hair, tense and unnerved, but afraid to show it—Pearl felt that very same anger and frustration melt away, replaced by concern.

“Oh, Amethyst, what happened? Are you okay?” Pearl asked, making her way to Amethyst across the garbage littered ground, bending down slightly so she could hold her by the shoulders. Covertly, she glanced down at Amethyst's chest, just to make sure that the gem was whole and undamaged—and it was, not a single chip out of place, and younger Gem would probably be so annoyed if she knew that Pearl had checked, but Pearl couldn't help it, she just worried sometimes—

“I'm fine,” Amethyst said, and there was enough assurance in her voice that it almost sounded true. Still, Pearl pulled the purple Gem into a hug—and after a token amount of resistance, Amethyst melted into it.

They felt, rather than heard Garnet's approach—her footsteps were as silent as ever, but you could still sense the faint harmony of the fusions' two gems. “Amethyst,” Garnet said. “You're back earlier than I expected.”

“Yeah. Well.” Amethyst paused, shifting around slightly to face the other Gem, though she didn't break out of the embrace. “I kind of...ran into somebody by mistake.”

Well, that an obviously deliberately vague statement if Pearl had ever heard one. Garnet clearly thought so as well, because she asked, clear command in her voice, “Tell us who.”

“Just that fusion at the bottom of the ocean.”

“What?!” Pearl shrieked, jumping backwards with shock.

“Look, it's no big deal...” Amethyst began.

“It sure sounds like a big deal to me!” Pearl protested. “You were in the ocean, and Greg said that
thing has control over water.”

She rather hoped, despite herself, that Amethyst would say 'nope, not at all', and it would turn out that Greg had been wrong all along. Because if he'd been wrong about that, what else was he wrong about?

But of course, Amethyst merely rubbed one of her arms and said, “Er, yeah. She did. But I escaped, so...”

“What was the fusion like?” Pearl asked.

“Ugly.”

“Amethyst.”

“What?” the youngest Gem exclaimed. “She was. She had, like, arms for legs, and four eyes that were always looking in different directions. Ugly.”

“Lack of coordination between the component Gems,” Garnet commented. It was difficult to tell, but Pearl thought that beneath the usual calm demeanour, she seemed... perturbed. “I'm surprised they're still fused together. Based on the description, I thought they would have split apart by now.”

Amethyst scoffed, moving to sit on a spare tire. “Those two? Nah, they might hate each other, but they're not going anywhere. The fusion's got her own personality now. Calling herself Malachite.”

“Well. That's concerning,” Garnet said.

And it was, Pearl recognized- because she wasn't buying Amethyst's story that she escaped, just like that. Hydrokinesis was something of an undervalued trait in Gems, but on a planet with a surface that was 70% covered in water, it was truly a formidable power. Especially if it had the sheer strength of a fusion behind it. It must have been very difficult for Amethyst to even flee from such a being, let alone fight her. The thought of facing such an opponent was enough to put Pearl on edge- especially with the knowledge that they would have to face her, eventually. She (or they, perhaps) could not just be left alone, roaming Earth's waters unchecked.

But somehow, Pearl thought that Garnet wasn't just referring to that.

Garnet was a fusion, too. She knew better than anyone what that truly meant. Pearl had fused many times before, and for the most part, she had enjoyed those experiences immensely- but the thought of truly losing herself, giving herself up so completely to another Gem... she couldn't do it. Even for someone she loved, so totally and completely, she couldn't. Not permanently, at least.

And the opposite? Fusing with someone she hated, someone she detested? Pearl couldn't imagine doing that for even a moment, let alone staying that way. Sharing a body, hearing each others' very thoughts, until they began to blend together, impossible to tell apart- wanting to separate, but held together by the sheer force of the emergent personality's will...

That must have struck close to home for Garnet. Because over the past day Pearl had been seeing slight shudders in her form- quick and subtle, to be sure, to the point where it could hardly be noticed, but those quivers are there, nonetheless. Instability.

As twisted as it might sound, Pearl was honestly relieved to see those shudders. Pearl had been so, so close to losing control, to actually screaming at Garnet, begging her to just do something, to react- but those faint signs of fission, they'd been enough to stop her. It was proof that behind that cool, calm exterior, Garnet was just as distraught as the rest of them, and that that turmoil was so great that
it was actually threatening to *pull* Ruby and Sapphire apart.

So just right now, Malachite wasn't the only fusion literally holding herself together.

“Well, that doesn't matter right now,” Garnet said, shaking Pearl out of her thoughts. “We have more urgent matters to deal with.”

On her tire, Amethyst leaned back. “If you say so. Seems to me that we'd have better luck taking on Malachite. At least we know where she is.”

"That doesn't matter," Garnet said. "While she poses a threat, it's a distant one. I am far more concerned about Peridot. We do not know where she is, or what technology she possesses. We need to find her, and we need to know what we're up against."

"And the only way to do that is get our memories back, yeah, you said that earlier," Amethyst said. "And I'm just saying, we don't know how to do that, so we might as well go take down Miss Under The Sea."

“Actually,” Pearl said with a cough, "we came up with a plan to fix that."

“Wait, really?".

“Yes,” Pearl said. “Which you would know if you hadn't decided to go swimming off in the middle of our meeting.” She couldn't help put let a little of her earlier frustration leak back into her voice.

Amethyst shrugged, saying, “You didn't need me anyway.” She had the decency to look a little ashamed, however, before asking, “So what is it?”

So, after a glance in Garnet's direction, Pearl explained. Amethyst seemed skeptical the whole way through, but by the end a determined smile spread across her face. “OK,” she said. “I'm down. Let's do this.”

“Good,” Garnet said, pushing her visor up the bridge of her nose. “We'll go now.”

“Wait. *Right* now?” said Pearl, startled.

“I see know reason to delay,” Garnet said

“Well,” Pearl began, and then stopped, unsure of how to continue. She wasn't sure if Amethyst was actually ready- whatever had transpired beneath the ocean with Malachite had clearly left the young Gem shaken, despite the brave face. Pearl couldn't just *say* that, however. She needed an alternative. “We... should take more time to prepare.”

Garnet was like stone. “What kind of preparations do you suggest?”

Pearl floundered. She didn't have an answer to that. She had thought, perhaps, that she might have been able to co-opt the weapons system from the recovered spaceship, but after hours of tiresome work she'd been forced to admit that such an endeavour would be fruitless without more information. And, of course, there was only one way they were going to get that information- and it would not be by sitting around in the Temple.

“Oh, come *on*, P,” Amethyst said, bounding over to Pearl when she didn't offer anything. “What's the hold up? Not *scared*, are you?”

“Of course not,” Pearl answered, indignant. “I am a Gem warrior and-”
“Yeah, sure, if you say so,” Amethyst said, grinning. “But I think you're just chicken.”

Just to reinforce her point, a beak sprouted on the purple Gem's face. Pearl gaped at it.

“I am not a chicken!” she squawked.

In response, Amethyst merely began clucking, which dissolved into riotous laughter as she ran off towards the door. Garnet gave the fuming Pearl a heavy look, then went off in the direction of the other Gem: a silent command to follow. Pearl did so, stifling a sigh. They were right, after all. There was no point delaying.

They would do what they had to, and they would succeed.

By the time she'd caught up with the others, and the group had arrived at Amethyst's portal out of the Temple, Pearl was feeling well and truly prepared for the mission, eager to warp off.

So, of course, they didn't get the chance to do so. Because once they excited the Temple they found Greg and Steven sitting there. Waiting.

If Pearl had been feeling reasonable, she would have acknowledged that the two humans didn't actually appear to have been waiting, per say. The younger one did live in that house, after all, so it was only natural that he would be spending time there. He merely seemed to be conversing with his father while eating his morning meal.

Pearl wasn't feeling reasonable, however, so all she focused on was the way the two humans immediately turned to look at the Gems when they entered, how their attention shifted completely. The boy even set his bowl down on the kitchen counter, and Pearl realized they were not leaving without a long, drawn-out conversation.

“Morning,” Steven said to them, a bright smile on his face. (Surely he can't actually be this cheerful, considering the situation, Pearl thought).

“Good morning,” Garnet replied, in far more measured a tone. Amethyst raised a hand in casual greeting. Pearl did nothing.

“Hey,” said Greg, exhaustion utterly filling that single word. Despite everything, in that moment Pearl felt a strange, sudden sense of kinship towards the man. It was obvious that he hated this situation almost as much as she did.

Silence stretched. Pearl's gaze swept across the room, glancing around at the appliances, the furniture, the ceiling- anything besides the two humans in front of her- before finally falling on the warp pad which stood just a few feet away. Would it truly be so hard for them to just walk onto it and leave?

(Apparently, yes.)

“So,” Steven said at last. “What's up?” Pearl resisted the urge to glance upwards, recognizing the term as a human colloquialism.

“We are going to restore our memories,” Garnet answered frankly.

Steven's face burst into an even larger smile, one which truly did seem to be more genuine than the last. Greg, too, grinned. “So you worked out how, then?”

Amethyst grimaced, and Pearl shifted uneasily. “Not precisely,” the latter said. “But we have a plan.”
“OK,” said Greg. “Let's hear it.”

Pearl looked to Garnet, who merely stared impassively back, saying nothing. Amethyst didn't offer anything, either. This was Pearl's plan, and so the other two were deferring to her to explain it. Very well, then, she thought, forcing back her discomfort. I will.

“We will Warp to the Dome of Knowledge,” began Pearl.

“Where's that?” Steven asked.

Pearl frowned at the interruption, but answered nonetheless. “It's where we woke up yesterday without our memories. We will return in order to determine what happened, and simply find a way to reverse the effect.”

The humans waited for her to continue, and when she did not, blinked. “That's it?” asked Greg.

“Yes,” said Garnet.

The man stared at them. “That's not a plan!” he exclaimed.

“Yes it is!” retorted Pearl, defensive.

“No, it's not,” he said, nearly yelling as he moved forward. “That's just a bunch of things you hope will happen! Trust me, I know the difference!”

Pearl's nostrils flared. Amethyst came to stand beside her, glaring daggers at the man. “Hey, shove off,” she growled. “Just because your plans never work—”

For the second time in as many days, the man's face darkened with barely restrained fury. “That's completely different.”

“Oh yeah? How?”

“Because you guys are putting yourselves in serious danger!” he yelled. “You came back from that place yesterday missing thirteen whole years! You don't even know how or why, but now you're just going to right back there, anyway? How do you know it's not gonna happen again, huh? Or that you won't get zapped by something even worse?”

Garnet stepped forward to stand between the adult human and the other two Gems. She seemed even more rigid than usual. “We don't know,” she said simply. “But we don't have any other options.”

Because that was the infuriating thing, wasn't it? That Greg was right. That when you came right down to it, her plan was risky at best, and downright foolish at worst. Yet none of them had been able to come up with anything better.

“Understand, Greg,” Garnet continued. “There is too much at stake here for us not to try.”

The man looked from the fusion Gem to the little boy standing at his side, who'd watched the entire exchange in wide-eyed silence. Finally, he slumped in defeat. “Yeah,” he said, still looking at his son. “I get it. I don't like it. But I get it.”

Garnet nodded, as though she had truly cared about his permission, and began to stride towards the warp pad. Before her comrades could move to follow, however, they were stopped. “Wait!” Steven said in a sudden outburst. “I think I can help!”

“...How?” Amethyst asked, voicing Pearl's own skepticism.
“My bubble,” he said, words falling out of his mouth in a flood. “If we stand inside of it, whatever got you guys last time won't be able to reach us. We'll all be safe!”

“I don't know...” Greg began.

“I'm really good now! Look, I can show you!” He tugged eagerly on the man's arm. A pink light began to glow underneath his shirt, and suddenly a pink bubble blossomed around the two of them.

Pearl gasped. It truly did look just like Rose's. The way it radiated with power, it even felt like hers.

It had Rose's strength too, it seemed, for when Garnet walked over to the bubble and banged down, hard, with one of her gauntlets, the sphere held. It didn't crack open, or pop, or even dent. Inside the bubble Greg flinched automatically, only to be consoled by his son. Greg said something in response, although the words could not be heard from outside.

Garnet stepped back, crossing her arms as her gauntlet vanished. Inside the bubble, the boy clapped once, and it vanished with a small pop.

“-urvived the crash!” he was saying to his father.

“I know that. I know it's strong.” Greg replied. “That's not the point. The Gems forgot thirteen years, Steven! It didn't really matter to them-” he flinched at his own words, realizing how it sounded, and turned to the aliens, face flushed. “That's not what I meant! It's just- you guys are thousands of years old. It doesn't, you know, hurt you to lose a decade or whatever. But Steven's not even eleven yet! What happens if the bubble can't protect you? What if he forgets his whole life?”

That was a... sobering thought. Pearl had already considered the chance of a complete memory wipe happening to herself or one of her friends, and as chilling a prospect as that may be, at least she and the others would still be able to function afterwards. Even if she forgot all her own, personal memories, her fundamental programming would still be in place. Human infants, however, had no such programming. While Pearl had no real experience in the area, her impression of babies was that they were tiny, practically immobile creatures, constantly crying, incapable of speech, or defense, or even feeding themselves. Humans had to learn all of that from scratch. Without his memories, would Steven revert to that stage? (Had he ever even gone through such a stage in the first place?)

With that in mind, perhaps Greg was correct. This most likely was a mission too dangerous a mission for a human child, even one who was half-Gem.

Garnet didn't seem quite so certain. She hardly seemed to react to Greg's words at all, but approached Steven, squatting down so that she was closer to his level. “Steven,” the fusion said. “You know your own powers better than any of us. Only you can make this decision. Knowing the risks, tell me if you're still willing to come on this mission.”

He stared up at Garnet for a long time, a surprisingly solemn expression on his small face. Then he said, “Yes.

“I'm sorry Dad,” he continued, looking back at the man as Garnet straightened. “But the Gems need their memories back, and if I can do anything to help, I need to try.”

Pearl expected Greg to be angry, to argue, to scream. Instead, the man just wore a small, weary smile as he laid a hand on Steven's shoulder. “This is going to become a theme, isn't it?”

“Dad...”

“I know, I know. Do what you need to do buddy. But you three,” he said, turning towards the
Crystal Gems. “You have to promise to protect him, alright?”

Such a promise was unnecessary. They had all already vowed to protect human kind, no matter what. And he was Rose's son. That went deeper than anything, as far as Pearl was concerned.

They all promised anyway, just to reassure the man. Then the three of them, and Steven, went to the platform to warp away. They'd been distracted enough, and it wouldn't do to sit around. Before they all disappeared in a beam of white light, however, they were just able to catch Greg telling them to stay safe.

Pearl had always enjoyed travelling by warp stream. Those moments, brief as they were, always gave her a chance to collect her thoughts. She could have used such a chance just then, but she couldn't help but be distracted by how, once again, Steven kept floating upwards. It wasn't as bad as the last two trips, admittedly- the child was currently only hovering just below Garnet's waist- but still. Could he not warp properly? If not, was it because of his human heritage, or simple immaturity?

Oh well. As long as he didn't injure himself, Pearl supposed it didn't matter.

Soon enough, they arrived at their location, the Gems appearing with elegant ease while the boy fell awkwardly to his feet. The place looked nearly identical to how it had when they'd left, though the sun was now shining. The air was heavy with humidity, and tangled jungle trees and vines grew all over the alien architecture, reclaiming the land as its own.

“Woah,” Steven breathed, looking around. “Where are we?”

“The Dome of Knowledge,” Pearl replied testily. Hadn't he been paying attention during her explanation?

“I know that,” Steven said, a hint of reproach in his voice. “I mean, where in the world are we?”

Oh.

Thankfully, before Pearl had to think of how to properly respond to that, Amethyst took over for her.

“We're in the Amazon rainforest!”

“Wow, really? Cool! My friend Connie was telling me all about it the other day- there are all sorts of cool animals! Think we'll get to see a puma?”

Amethyst's grin was more than large enough to match the boy's. “We might!”

“Awesome!” he said, and in his excitement went running off the Warp Pad- only to be stopped by a heavy hand on his shoulder. Garnet didn't want them going any further without a shield, just in case. This earned a groan from Amethyst, who thought the whole thing sounded overcautious. The bubble shield was the only reason they had brought the boy, however, and eventually she too relented. With a clap from Steven, the four of them soon found themselves safely encased in a large bubble.

Though, not one quite large enough.

“Well,” Amethyst mumbled, half of her face pressed into Garnet's thigh. “This is comfy.”

Nobody responded immediately, because Garnet was being her usual silent-self, and the other two were busy attempting to disentangle themselves. They were not particularly successful. Steven eventually managed to pull himself out of Amethyst's mane, spitting out hair, while Pearl pressed herself against the sphere's side, giving herself a couple free inches.
“There's no way this is viable,” she said. “We should just take the boy back...”

“No, no, it's not that bad,” Steven said, even as he fought to keep himself from getting lost in Amethyst's hair again. “Look, if I sit on Garnet's shoulders, there'll be a lot more room.”

Garnet paused, considering the suggestion, then hoisted the child upwards. Soon he was sitting on her shoulders, one leg on each side of the neck. The bubble was almost too small, since his head was pressed right against its ceiling, but if he huddled down and sunk into the Gem's afro, it wasn't too bad.

“Well, this is a little bit better,” Pearl admitted as she straightened. However, it was still rather awkward and difficult to move in such a small space. She still wasn't convinced if this was going to work, and was about to say as much, except Amethyst seemed to have been inspired by Steven's idea. The purple Gem transformed into crow shape and flew up to perch on Pearl's shoulder. Pearl let her. It was a clever idea, and with only Garnet and herself standing, there was enough space in the bubble to move with relative ease, and besides. It kind of felt nice, having Amethyst's familiar weight there.

With that all organized, they rolled off the Warp Pad, and began their investigation.

The Dome of Knowledge, as the name implied, was a large round building, built near the very top of a mountain. It was constructed from a shimmery white marble, which when combined with its shape, gave it a similar appearance to the gemstone which was Pearl's namesake; but where the one embedded in her forehead was slightly oblong, this was a much more perfect sphere in shape. When the first reports of the experiments conducted in this place had started coming in, Pearl had felt almost personally affronted by the Dome's design- it was horrible, feeling as though they bore any similarity. She was almost thankful that through the bubble-shield it appeared pink instead of white, making the resemblance less striking.

The four of them did not immediately proceed into the Dome proper, however. Instead, Garnet first had them explore the outer platform which ran around its entire circumference; that was where they had woken up, after all, making it a logical place to start their search. However, the exploration was easier in theory than in practice. Over the millennia the jungle had grown wild on the mountainside, encroaching into the area, covering the ground in all manner of debris; sticks, vines, branches, boulders, even long, thick roots from massive trees. Usually, Pearl would have appreciated how the natural processes of the planet were destroying this place- but usually she was capable of walking and jumping. Stuck in a bubble, it was much harder to navigate the terrain, though with perseverance and brute force they somehow managed to roll over every obstacle that got in their way.

The whole time they kept their eyes open and alert, but they saw nothing which seemed particularly noticeable or dangerous.

About a third of the way around the ring, Steven asked, “What happened to this place, anyway? Was there a battle or something?”

“Most of this is natural degradation,” Pearl answered. This was a true answer, but it was not a particularly honest one. While the planet's weather, flora and fauna had clearly taken its toll on the place, Pearl suspected that a battle of some sort had in fact occurred here- but she didn't know for certain. While she had been a high ranking member of the rebellion, part of Rose's inner circle, there were still many details about the war that she didn't know. This was mostly due to the fact that in those chaotic final weeks of the conflict, there had been so much confusion and misinformation. Communication had failed for both sides, the chain of command had began to break down, and the remaining Homeworld-allied Gems had panicked as they'd attempted to flee the planet. With so much uncertainty, not even Rose knew (had known) everything that had happened. Looking at some
of the damage to the structure around them- chunks of fallen marble, large cracks in the floor and walls- it was more than likely that some sort of fighting had occurred. Perhaps some sect of the Crystal Gems had launched an assault against the Dome, or perhaps dissent among the Homeworld's own people had spread and turned violent. Thousands of years after the fact, there was no way of knowing.

Except... was all the damage that old? Some of it certainly was, but now that the child had drawn her attention to it, Pearl found her looking at her surroundings more critically. For example, while some of the dislodged chunks of marble were water-worn and covered in moss, other pieces were still clean, smooth and shiny. She hadn't noticed before- but then, of course, she'd been looking for either direct danger or Gem technology, not admiring the background scenery.

It was slightly concerning; if the damage was recent, then some uncomfortable possibilities were raised. The problem, of course, was that there were too many possibilities, and too little data to draw from. If she brought up anything now, it would just seem that she was worrying for no sound reason. For now, she would look for more evidence, try to construct a proper hypothesis.

When finally they had circled the entire Dome, with nothing but Pearl's vague suspicions to show for it, the Crystal Gems went to enter the building itself. Again, the boy's bubble made this trickier than necessary. The entrances to the building could only be reached by long, sloping ramps. Their gradient was a normally reasonable 60 degrees, but when inside a ball, that was more than steep enough that gravity kept threatening to pull them backwards. Really, as Amethyst pointed out, the only really positive was that the Dome hadn't instead been built with stairs.

In the end, determination won out against gravity. The trick was momentum. As long as they kept moving, as quickly as they could, Pearl and Garnet's strength (accompanied by words of encouragement from Amethyst and Steven, sitting on their respective shoulders), was enough to carry them up the ramp until they were able to roll onto the blessedly flat surface of the Dome's proper floor.

Once there, they stared down the long hallways that spread out in every direction in front of them. Pearl had never actually been in the building itself before, but she knew that it had a fiendishly complex design. The many hallways branched out, curving and twisting in unusual ways. They were all plain white and utilitarian in design, baring no decorative art or symbols, no directions or labels. There were no true landmarks at all. The place had been created like a maze in order to deter spies, and it had worked. The rebellion had lost almost every person they had sent into this place, and what little intelligence they'd gotten in return had been piecemeal and often inaccurate. Eventually, Rose Quartz had simply banned any further investigation of the Dome, considering it a waste of lives, time and resources.

The place made her skin prickle in a way that no battlefield she'd ever visited had.

As uncomfortable as the place made her feel, Pearl had to admit that it had a couple positive features. The Dome's automatic lighting enchantments still worked, so the four of them wouldn't be stumbling around in the dark. Additionally, unlike outside, the hallways were completely clear- the sense of power that permeated the structure was so strong that none of the native plants or animals had ever ventured inside, making movement easy. The maze-like construction would have been worrying, but between Garnet's future vision and her own impeccable sense of direction, there was little chance of getting lost.

Despite all that, it was obvious that finding what they were looking for (whatever it was) in such a large, sprawling place would be... well, to use a human term, it would be like looking for a needle in proverbial a haystack.
Well, Pearl wasn't going to let herself be defeated by a simple haystack, was she?

They made their way down the hallways, trying to search in as orderly and methodical a manner as they could, considering the building's rambling layout. Every twenty feet or so there would be a new room; they would peer in through doorways which were too small to admit the bubble, trying to determine if there was anything relevant inside.

For a long time, there clearly wasn't. The first dozen places they inspected were merely meeting rooms, conference areas or, more rarely, places of leisure- although they were very plain and drab compared to the beauty of the Lunar Sea Spire or Rose's Garden. They found the Dome's communication hub, which had clearly been long out of commission. There was an armoury, filled with spears, swords, maces, pikes- everything necessary to arm Gems who did not have weapons of their own to naturally summon. (Amethyst desperately wanted to raid the place after they were finished, and honestly, there were a couple of swords that Pearl herself wouldn't have minded adding to her collection).

As they moved deeper into the Dome, the rooms began to grow more interesting. These areas would have been more easily defended, so it was where the important, sensitive research had been conducted. There was one room filled entirely with star-maps and diagrams of the solar system, another with plans for new Red Eye models. Another was clearly dedicated to improving Kindergarten function, judging from the sleek, half-built Injectors which littered the laboratory benches. Amethyst's talons had begun to dig into Pearl's shoulders at the sight, and they had moved on quickly.

After over an hour and nearly twenty different corridors, and they still hadn't found anything which potentially looked like it was responsible for their memory loss. Backtracking and taking a right turn down new hallway, it initially seemed as though this one would be no different. The first room was just another, smaller armoury; the second one was clearly some sort of prison cell, although the cage's bars were broken and the cell was now filled with nothing but an odd, papery debris that littered the floor. Once they finally arrived at the corridor's last room, however, the explorers finally found the metaphorical treasure chest.

It was the records room. It was filled with row after roll of tall shelves, each holding hundreds of meticulously organized scrolls. All the administrative documents, the experiment records, the research papers- everything that had ever gone on in the Dome of Knowledge- it could be found there.

If you were willing to do lots and lots of reading, that was.

“Well, it'll be pretty hard to do any reading from inside the bubble,” Steven pointed out as they stood in the room's threshold. Everyone looked towards Garnet, who had somehow become the default leader in Rose's absence. There was a long silence, and Pearl wondered if the fusion was looking towards the future, or merely deep in thought.

“Drop the shield,” Garnet eventually commanded. “Everyone keep alert. We need to to be careful.”

Pearl figured the warning was mostly aimed at Amethyst, who had a tendency to run wild at times, and Steven, since there was no end to the kind of trouble that a human child could cause in a place like this, but to her mild surprise both of them seemed to take Garnet's words fairly seriously. Together, the four of them advanced into the room, warier than was perhaps necessary.

“We need to be methodical,” Pearl said. “Everyone start at the end of one row, and move down it. Once you've read something, put it back. Make sure to remember if you've already looked at it.”

With that announced, she picked off the first scroll from the shelf nearest to her, and began to read.
Scanning quickly, she had gotten a grand total of three lines before she was interrupted by the boy. “Uh. I have no idea what any of this says.”

Pearl peered around the corner to the other side of the shelf, where Steven was standing with a scroll, which unfurled, was almost longer than he was. Pearl resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “That's because it's not in English.”

“Oh,” he said.

Did he truly not know how to read Gem language? That seemed like a major oversight in his education, Pearl thought. But then, glancing down at the page she held in her hands and considering some of the things Gems had written about, perhaps it was not such a bad thing.

“So...um, what should I do instead?” Steven wondered.

Pearl hadn't the faintest idea, but Garnet did. “You can stand guard,” she said, sounding as serious and certain as ever. “If you notice anything unusual or dangerous, you tell us immediately. Understood?”

“Oh, I see!” the boy responded, snapping her a salute. Pearl allowed her self a brief moment to be amazed as how easily Garnet interacted with him; usually she was as baffled by humans as Pearl herself, but looking at the way she handled Steven, you never would have known. Then she turned her attention back to the scroll.

There was nothing relevant in it, or the next, or the one following that. Pearl flew through the scrolls quickly, eyes glancing quickly over the page, lingering just long enough to determine the topic, before moving on. Her speed was only partly due to a desire for efficiency: it was also out of a deep distaste for the scrolls’ contents. There had always been whispers about the kind of experiments conducted in this place, but now confronted with the primary literature, Pearl found it somehow even more horrifying than the exaggerated rumours that had been passed through the rebellion's camps. Every paper was written in the same dry, matter-of-fact tone, no matter the subject; whether it had been simple requests for supplies, or an experimental report on attempts to use shattered gem shards to create an obedient, semi-sentient army. Despite the cruel and gruesome nature of some of the subjects discussed, sometimes Pearl couldn't help but become intrigued despite herself; she'd be pulled deep into on paper's methodologies or discussion, drawn in by some horrified curiosity. Eventually she would break free, at which point she'd quickly re-roll the scroll and shove it back into its proper place, blushing bright blue.

Time wore on, and the number of read scrolls piled up. Occasionally, Amethyst would moan with boredom. Pearl too became more and more frustrated with every scroll she read without finding anything; she channeled that frustration into a laser focus. She would find what they were looking for. She would.

And finally, she did.

Or rather, she found the first clue, the first hint. It was in a report on the various upcoming projects planned for a decade long-since passed; tucked among a long table were the words, 'Memory Alteration; Trials 15-20'. If Pearl had had a heart, it would have skipped; as it was, she merely stopped, wide-eyed, before pouring over the document with even greater intensity, until she finally found more information in a small foot note. 'For more information, refer to Project Obsidian'.

Instead of returning that scroll back on the shelves, she placed it at her feet for easy reference. Then she dived back into collection, searching for one thing and one thing only.
It did not take her long to find the *Project Obsidian* files, and when she did, she discovered that it was not a single scroll but rather a large collection of them, all tied together with a fine red ribbon. Once, the ribbon had carried a spell which would have shocked any unauthorized Gem which tried to untie it; but over the many centuries that spell had faded, and now Pearl received nothing more than an unpleasant tingling as she pulled the ribbon off and let it drop to the ground.

The earliest scroll did not bare the heading of Project Obsidian at all; rather, it was a theoretical paper, titled *On the Possible Disruption and Adjustment on the Memory Cores of Gems*. Pearl read the abstract, which simply said in more detail what could be gleaned from the title alone. It had been theorized that the memory banks of Gems could be wiped, either partially or completely, and that perhaps even "new" (*Fake*, she mentally corrected) memories could be installed in their place. *Obviously such technology could have many practical applications,* the last sentence of the abstract had explained, *such as aiding in the recovery of Gems who have experienced extreme emotional trauma, or in the re-rehabilitation of criminals.*

Brainwashing. That meant brainwashing.

She only scanned the rest of that first text; it was very theoretical, with few useful details, though Pearl couldn't help but be fascinated in the science despite herself. She glanced over the next document, which was merely a copy of the paperwork marking the project approved for practical research. The next scroll was one far more relevant: the initial plans and blue-prints for the technology itself, containing diagrams of a device which vaguely resembled a human gun in shape.

Then came the experimental logs on the first trials after said device was constructed, performed on a captive Topaz. All the trials were all marked as 'failures'- the device simply did not function. Neither did the later models, despite the scientific principles behind their design being sound. The flaw, one researcher had wrote, was a simple matter of power. All gemstones were extremely powerful, and their natural defense systems resisted any attempt to re-write their data and memory cores. Overcoming such defenses would require the power of a nuclear reactor, which was dubbed impractical...

...or, the power from another Gem.

So the researchers had changed tactics. They had created a completely new gem model, built entirely around the capability to alter memories. Pearl briefly scanned its code. Coding had never been her area of expertise, but even with her basic knowledge of Gem programming she could see that this one's was fundamentally different. Although just as long as any other Gem model's gemetic code, almost everything but the most basic functions had been replaced with the complex sequence required to encode for such a technically complex power-set. The new gem hadn't been created at a standard Kindergarten, of course- the date showed the project had been started long after initial bombardments on the Kindergartens had begun, making it unsuitable for such a sensitive project. Instead, they had been created at a nearby volcanic site. Of the ten attempted prototypes, only two had managed to fully mature. There were sketches of both these gemstones in one of the documents, depicting shiny, jagged black stones which were given the name Obsidian.

The moment the new Gems were finished, their newly formed body constructs had been destroyed: the researchers had only ever needed those gems as a power-source, after-all. The inert stones had been mounted into devices with an operational end which, upon making contact with a Gem or their projected body, would release a strong electrical current which could interfere with their memory storage system *without otherwise hurting or harming the Gem*.

These trials had been far more successful. The short-term memories of the Topaz, and several other subjects, were successfully wiped. There were, however, side-effects.
Subjects would often become confused and disorientated after 'treatment', as the papers described it. In some cases, they would become lethargic and unresponsive; in others, sporadic and violent, even in models with normally calm temperaments. Some subjects didn't just lose short-term memories, but longer term ones, as well; this wouldn't necessarily have been considered a negative, if some of the memories lost hadn't included essential skills and abilities. One subject, a Spar who had previously worked as a fighter pilot, completely forgot how to operate a spaceship; a Pyrite became unable to summon her weapon. In some cases, 'patients' were completely unable to relearn the lost abilities, as if a mental block was preventing the necessary pathways from being accessed. Some even began to forget how to project their physical form. They would shape-shift constantly, or glitch out, taking on strange, warped bodies- the descriptions made Pearl think that this may have been early stages of the Corruption.

Higher ups had been displeased. What purpose was such a technology if it rendered anyone treated by it nonfunctional?

So the researchers assigned to the project had came up with one final, desperate plan. Take one of the obsidian Gems out of their device; let it reform. Kept under heavy guard, she would be trained in her power. Hopefully, with a conscious mind directing the ability, the memory wiping could be controlled, side-effects minimized or prevented altogether, and the project would finally be successful.

“I know what happened to us,” Pearl announced to the room. “We weren't affected by another piece of technology at all. It was another Gem.”

Chapter End Notes

Interesting Background Information: obsidian is a shiny black 'stone' which is in fact a kind of glass formed from certain kinda of lava. It is exceptionally hard and brittle, forming very sharp edges; because of this, obsidian has historically been used for knives and other weapons.
Pearl's words brought her companions to her side almost instantly. Garnet stood at her shoulder, staring down at the parchments in Pearl's hand, while an excited Amethyst grabbed at them herself. Pearl allowed the purple Gem to take a few of the earlier documents, but she kept the later, more important ones held in a vice-like grip. Steven came as well, suddenly ducking underneath's Pearl arm, standing on his tip-toes to get a look at scrolls he couldn't even understand.

It would be a waste of time to have the others read through everything themselves, so Pearl did her best to summarize, explaining about the failed early experiments, the gem-powered memory-alteration guns, their unpredictable effects, and the eventual decision to let the Obsidian regenerate.

“So another Gem did this to you guys?” Steven asked, once Pear had finished.

“It's the only explanation,” Pearl said. “One of the obsidian gems was left inert in its prototype device, but nobody was able to get it functioning correctly.”

“So did this reformed Gem 'function correctly'?” Amethyst questioned, her voice heavy with distaste. “No more freaky side-effects?”

Pearl didn't actually know; she hadn't read any further than that point. She did so then, leaning forward as she skimmed through the rest of the document, trying to read ahead even as she dictated its contents.

“There were initially,” Pearl said. “The memory alteration is an ability like any other, so it required-practice, to improve.” As she read about just how much practice had been required, her stomach heaved, as though she had swallowed rotten human food. “Over time, however, there was a marked improvement in results. Obsidian learned how to specifically target certain memories and time-frames, and her...patients...stopped suffering from various memory malfunctions.”

She hesitated before continuing, glancing down at the child who was still standing right in front of her. This hardly seem appropriate for him to be hearing, but she supposed it couldn't be helped. “She became so proficient, in fact, that she was issued a permanent guard.”

“To protect her from attack?” Garnet asked.

“Partially.”

Garnet understood the dark undercurrent in Pearl's tone, and nodded. “I see.”

Amethyst (and Steven, for that matter) didn't, though the Kindergartener could tell she was missing something, and nudged Pearl for an explanation. Pearl gave it: “The memory alteration process was very powerful. Obsidian merely had to come into physical contact with another Gem to activate it. The longer the period of contact, the more significant the changes which could be made, though the process could be accelerated through direct contact with the gemstone itself, as opposed to projected bodies.” Pearl gave Amethyst a meaningful look, and she saw the exact moment when realization dawned. Obsidian's behaviour had not always cooperative, and management at the Dome of Knowledge had become concerned that she might have attempted to strike out at her captors- and all it would take was a single touch. They had therefore assigned her a permanent guard so that she ever
did attempt to turn, she could be 'shut down' immediately.

“They were also concerned about accidents and Crystal Gem raids, however,” Pearl said, with a touch of pride at the last part. “They didn't want to risk Obsidian being damaged. They'd done experiments, and found that if the Obsidian's physical body was destroyed, the effects of her powers would be immediately reversed.”

Amethyst punched the air, and Garnet even smiled. Pearl smiled, too, pleased at her discovery. “That's the weakness. The Achille's Heel, as the Greeks might have said. To restore our memories, we simply have to force Obsidian back into her Gem.”

(Pearl felt a tugging on her arm. Looking down again, she saw it was merely the boy, and ignored him.)

“She wiped our memories like, less than a day ago. She's still gotta be around here,” Amethyst said, hand curling into a fist. She smashed it into her other open palm. “Let's find her and destroy her.”

“Not a her,” Garnet said. “Not anymore. It must have been affected by the corruption, just like every other Gem on the planet.”

“Okay, fine, who cares? A monster will be even easier to beat.”

Again, Pearl felt Steven tugging on her arm, but continued to ignore it. She couldn't be babysitting a human child while they were strategising.

Garnet frowned. “Monster or not, it was still able to defeat us last time-”

“Garnet,” Steven interrupted, cutting her off with a fierce whisper as he decided to start tugging on her arm.

“Yes,” Garnet said, in a tone so level it was impossible to tell if she was annoyed.

“I think I sense something. Another Gem.” Perhaps unconsciously, he pressed a hand against his stomach, above where Rose’s gem sat.

Pearl frowned. “Well, I don't sense anyt-”

She stiffened, stopping herself mid-word. The boy was correct. It wasn't immediately obvious, but if she focused, she could feel something, past the familiar songs of Garnet and Amethyst, past the faded melody of the Rose Quartz gem. It was the ugly, disjointed feeling that all corrupted Gems possessed. It was angry. And it was getting closer.

The other two Gems felt it too. Garnet froze, looking forward at something only she could see, and finally said, “We need to move. Now.”

“Wait,” Pearl hissed, fighting down the urge to panic. She couldn't just leave all the documents behind- they might have vital information in them! She snatched the other scrolls from Amethyst's hands, and rolled them up as neatly as she could while being so rushed for time. The gem at her temple began to glow with a pure white light, and she shoved the documents straight into it, pushing them all into her personal pocket dimension for safekeeping.

The effort left Pearl slightly dizzy, as it always did when she accessed her gemstone dimension too quickly, and she found herself leaning against Garnet for support. She cursed her own weakness, and made a mental note to come back with pockets the next time she regenerated. She made herself stand up.
With those informative documents safely stored away, the three Crystal Gems and their companion made their way to the doorway. Steven stuck a head out around the corner, then immediately ducked back in, alarm written on his face. “It's right at the end of the hall!”

“So what? We can take it!” Amethyst said in a low voice, rushing forward herself, only to be held back by Garnet.

“No. Pearl said its powers are activated by touch. We can't it fight in such close quarters.”

Pearl nodded tersely in agreement, and Amethyst growled in frustration. All of them could feel the creature advancing, with that strange, single-mindedness.

“My bubble,” Steven said, glancing nervously between the doorway and the Gems. “We could, like, roll past it, make it chase us...”

“No- the bubble's too big to fit through the archway-” Pearl protested.

“Then it would have to come up after we're through the doorway,” Garnet said simply. “It would have to be fast, so that we would not be exposed. Steven, could you do that?”

The boy nodded once.

“Okay,” Garnet said, making the decision for all of them. “Let's go.”

Together, with Garnet at the head, the four of them rushed through the doorway. The monster immediately saw them, released a high-pitched hiss, then charged.

The detached, analytical part of Pearl which wasn't busy hoping that the human child would manage to raise his bubble in time noted that the monster resembled a spider. The creature was huge, larger than a full-grown human. It had only four legs, which were surprisingly large and muscular, but bent in the same proportions of an arachnid. It had two large, beady green eyes, and pincers in the place of a mouth. Its body was covered in a coarse, fur-like stubble, mainly grey and black in colour, but with green stripes which ran horizontally. From this angle, Pearl could not see its gem.

It took Pearl barely a second to process all this, and in that time, the boy did successfully manage to throw up his bubble around them. He hardly faltered at all.

Again, it was cramped inside the bubble, but now the Gems knew what to do. Garnet immediately picked Steven up and placed him on her shoulder, while Amethyst shape-shifted into the smaller form of a bird. The two largest of the Gems pressed their hands against the pink sphere's side, and started to run. Picking up speed, they intended to charge the monstrous faux-spider down.

As the bubble barrelled forward, the creature reared onto its hind legs, pincers twitching, releasing a hiss so loud and fierce that it was practically a roar. Then, from its abdomen, it released something silvery-white, which shot right towards them.

Garnet slammed her feet down immediately, and shifted her weight to the right in a desperate attempt to dodge the projectile in such a confined space. The bubble's occupant crashed into the side, but the sudden change in direction succeeded, and the strange projectile missed almost entirely, only managing to graze the sphere's side. It thankfully did not manage to pierce or shatter their protective dome; it turned out to be merely a sticky liquid which splattered against the sides of both the corridor and the bubble.

The Crystal Gems managed to regain their footing, and Pearl and Garnet prepared to restart their charge towards the monster, having ascertained that the new ability was not a threat. When they
moved to start rolling forward, however, they found a strong resistance— even pushing with all their
strength, something seemed to be holding the bubble back.

“The goo!” Amethyst shouted as she fluttered around Pearl's head. “It's hardened!”

Of course it has, Pearl thought. And the monster was advancing.

The liquid was an extremely strong adhesive, and they needed to find a way to break it. She
exchanged a look with Garnet, and the two of them began to rock back and forward; there was an
ugly cracking sound as the force began to shatter the glue which held them to the spot. Finally, with
one loud snap, they broke free, and began to roll onward once more.

The gem monster was already retaliating, however, and it shot yet another glob their way. This one
also missed, quite significantly in fact, but it quickly became apparent that this was the intent. Instead
of hitting them, it had landed on the ceiling of few feet ahead of them, where the gooey substance
began to drip downwards before solidifying into a net which partially blocked the path ahead.

“It's just like a spider!” Steven cried.

He was right. And spiders rarely fought head on. Instead, they lured their prey into traps...

It was clever, for a monster.

“Back!” Garnet barked, clearly realising they couldn't remain in the corridor without getting caught.
As they back-pedalled, she continued. “We need to get back into the room! Steven, drop the
bubble!”

They boy did so. The moment it was down the four of them scrambled back even farther, and dived
sideways into the records room, just missing being hit by yet another shot of sticky silk.

“Amethyst, bar the door,” Garnet ordered. The purple Gem didn't hesitate, instantly returning to her
default form and grabbing the nearest shelf, tossing it in front of the doorway. They heard the
monster hiss in fury even as Amethyst hurried off to grab another.

Pearl felt something twitch inside her as she saw all the carefully ordered scrolls go flying in every
direction as Amethyst hauled the shelves away. That scandalized horror joined the background
radiation of her panic.

“We can't just barricade the door!” she protested, arms flailing. “We're safe for now, but that won't
accomplish anything! We need to fight that creature- we need to get out of here-!”

“I know,” Garnet said simply. The fusion motioned Amethyst away from the blocked doorway,
where they could hear the creature scrabbling angrily in an attempt to break through. A gauntlet
formed around Garnet's right hand. She walked towards the far wall, raised her fist, and punched
right through it.

The boy riding upon her shoulders buried his face in her hair to protect himself from the debris
thrown up by her mighty blow. Behind them, the monstrous spider screeched at the fearsome noise.

“Quickly,” Garnet demanded, although it was hardly necessary, for her companions were already
moving. They rushed through the improvised door into the next room. It was filled with half-
completed reactor cores to power space-ships; Garnet moved right passed them all without a second
glance. She ignored the doorway into the hall as well, instead opting to merely punch yet another
hole in the next wall. Only once they'd moved into the room after that did Garnet lead them back into
the corridor. The monster was there, having abandoned it's attempts to break through the barricade,
but it was a significant distance away. Without any prompting, the boy summoned the Rose Quartz bubble around them. The Crystal Gems wasted no time, Pearl and Garnet breaking into a run almost the exact second it formed. Behind them, the spider shot yet another web at them, but it fell just short. It began to chase.

The bubble accelerated.

“Where do we go?!” Amethyst cried, as they rapidly approached the corridor's end.

“Left!” Pearl screamed, and the ball turned sharply in that direction. Pearl reached into herself, drawing on her internal compass and mental map. This place was a maze, designed to deceive, but she would not allow them to become lost.

“Right!” she called next. “Right! Down the middle! Turn off here!”

“It's still behind us!” Amethyst called, as another glob of glue hit the wall next to them.

Garnet began to accelerate. Pearl did her best to speed up as well, to match Garnet's long strides, even as she focused on remembering where they were in the labyrinth of corridors. “Left! Now left again! And again! Right!”

“We're losing her!” the boy yelled triumphantly. “Great job!”

“Another left! And right- and-”

And there it was, glorious beautiful sunlight streaming into this otherwise sterile place. Pearl had found the exit.

And the ramp.

The bubble hit it at full speed. The Gems managed to remain control for a few feet, but soon enough gravity took the reigns, and the bubble began to accelerate faster and faster. Pearl was the first one to trip, then Garnet a second a later; with their footing lost, the others, sitting on their shoulders fell too, and the four of them were all flung to the sides of the bubble by centrifugal force. There was screaming. The sphere kept rolling, having reached terminal velocity, and Pearl realized that with this momentum, they wouldn't stop when they reached the ramp's end; they were going to go flying off the mountainside, straight into the jungle—but before any of that could happen, the bubble popped.

The four of them flew through the feet for a couple of inches, before hitting the ground and rolling forward, ending up sprawled across the Dome's outer platform, groaning. The Gems brushed it off easily, but the human boy looked rather worse for wear. Even when the others managed to climb back to their feet, he remained on all fours, a distinctly inhuman green tinge to his cheeks. Pearl hoped he wouldn't vomit.

She shifted her gaze away from the child, looking back towards the Dome of Knowledge and the doorway they'd just so rapidly exited from. They other Gems watched it too.

“It'll catch up with us soon,” Amethyst commented, earning a nod from Garnet.

“We need a strategy,” Pearl said. “We can't let it touch us, or it will just wipe our memories again. I suggest an ambush.”

Tactics. Pearl was good at tactics; surveying battlefields, analyzing advantages, positioning troops. It
had made her a fine general during the rebellion, and she drew upon those skills now.

Guiding her teammates with holograms, she directed them into position to ambush the corrupted Obsidian. Garnet was made to stand just above the Dome's entrance; there she would be able to block of its retreat if necessary, and the high ground would be a helpful advantage if the melee fighter wanted to get in any hits without risking physical contact. Amethyst was hidden behind on of the dislodged chunks of marble; it would give her the element of surprise, placing her at a range where she should be able to tie the monster up with her whip. Steven, meanwhile, was tucked away into the relative safety of the branches of a nearby tree, hidden by foliage. Hopefully that would manage to keep him out of trouble. As for herself, Pearl stood in the centre of the platform, right in the open, acting as bait to lure the monster out.

They worked quickly, which was good, because after less than a minute the corrupted gem monster emerged from the gloom of the Dome.

It came out slowly, shifting it's head slowly in every direction, waving it's pincers as if smelling the air. Pearl stood there, directly in it's line of sight. She felt very exposed. She wished she could draw her weapon, but she couldn't yet, in case she managed to scare it away.

“Come one!” she called, even though she knew it couldn't understand her. “I'm all alone! Come and get me!”

After a moment of hesitation it did, suddenly jumping forward and sliding down the ramp towards her. As soon as it reached the bottom, the Crystal Gems all moved in coordinated flurry; Pearl reached to her Gem and pulled out her spear, and began to aim it. Amethyst jumped up from behind the bolder, whip already flying. And from her position atop the Dome's exit, Garnet punched down, hard, causing the doorway to cave-in and preventing a retreat.

That all went as planned. What Pearl had not foreseen, however, was the spider's reaction to sound of the Dome's doorway collapsing. It hissed, and then it leapt a good ten feet straight into the air. As such, Amethyst's whip missed completely, twirling uselessly below the monster's face. Pearl was able to adjust, and when she flung her spear, it hit true. With any other creature, it would have gone straight through the belly, a 'fatal' blow. However, this corrupted monster had taken many traits from a arachnids, and one of them was a hard exoskeleton; so hard that the spear bounced right off it, leaving only the slightest dent.

Pearl gaped. Amethyst swore.

Still in the air, the spider shot another projectile down at her. Pearl rolled, managing to dodge the gluey silk, pulling out yet another spear. She threw it, and it hit the monster in the side as it fell back to the ground, but again, it didn't leave a scratch.

Amethyst released a war cry, and as she took a running leap, throwing yet another whip at the creature. But the monster was fast, and it was able to dodge; this time, it leapt towards Pearl. The Gem hurriedly flipped to the side- the creature landed exactly where she had been standing. She was unnervingly close to it; close enough that she could see the exact texture of the 'fur', and was finally able to see it's gem, black and smooth and embedded in the back of it's abdomen. Pearl backed away, summoning yet another spear, though she kept this one in-hand. It was clear that she didn't have enough force to puncture the monster's exoskeletons; she'd have to use the spear to keep the monster back if it attempted to fight at close range.

Close range. That was where Garnet excelled, but the very fact that she was strongest at close quarters was why she was being kept out of the fight. The fusion did still have a few tricks to contribute, however. Garnet leapt from the Dome, and aiming her hands towards, shot her gauntlets
right down towards the monster like a pair of rockets. The spider sensed them just in time, and managed to dodge a direct hit. However, the impact with the ground caused a mighty explosion, one which manage to push even Pearl back. The spider was caught in the splash damage, and it went flying towards the forest, landing on its back just a few feet short of it.

It made an angry hissing sound, and quickly flipped right way up, before any of the Crystal Gems could take advantage of its compromised position. It faced them, crouched low, surveying them. With its pure green eyes, it was impossible to follow its gaze, but Pearl had the sense that it was analyzing them, trying to decide who was the easiest target. That was going to be a very tough decision, Pearl thought with pride.

Then there came the music.

It had to be music; there was no other description for the tune, as ugly and simple as it was. It came from a tree behind the monster, a loud artificial ringing. “Do do do DO do. Do do do do DO. Do do do do do. DO do DO do do...”

And then, from that very same tree, as the music continued, there was a sudden urgent rustling, and Pearl remembered: that was where she had hidden the boy.

The spider's head swept around, just as the ringing stopped. It was replaced by Steven's voice, quiet yet still far too loud. “HiConnie, on a mission can't talk right now, bye.”

Then there was silence. But it was too late. The gem monster had found its prey.

It charged forward, jumping onto the tree's trunk and began to scale it. They heard the boy yelp; a moment later he came tumbling out of the branches. He hit the ground, but forced himself up immediately, running desperately away from the creature. It screeched, and shot web at him; it managed to hit him squarely in the back, and the boy fell forward.

Amethyst was the one who came to his rescue. She ran forward, whip flailing; it hit the creature squarely in the face. It wasn't enough to damage its thick outer skeleton, but it made the monster recoil, and gave Steven enough time to climb back to his feet and start running again. Thankfully, he hadn't been foolish enough to roll over and get his back glued to the ground.

The creature was angry now. Pearl had thought it had been angry previously, but no, that was just the mindless background rage of almost every Gem monster. This was an intense, personal rage, directed at these interlopers which were now keeping it from its prey.

It swiped at Amethyst, who jumped back, just out of range, landing another whip strike on face. It hissed in pain, and grabbed at the lash with it's pincers- it tugged, nearly managing to pull the unprepared Amethyst right towards it. The purple Gem yelped, letting go of the whip just in time, jumping back out of the creature's range. It merely roared, raising back onto it's hind legs so it could shoot another glob of webbing out of it's spinneret at the Gem. Amethyst managed to dodge, but just barely.

In the monster's animalistic mind, an idea seemed to be forming. It took a sudden, unexpected step towards Amethyst; it watched the Gem jump even farther back.

It had realized that its opponents didn't want to get close.

It really was clever for a monster. Pearl could almost see its thought processes whirring away as its head swept around, allowing it to evaluate its opponents. Amethyst, who excelled at close-quarters fighting, was clearly struggling- but still, her whip gave her good range, and it could hurt the
creature, enough to make the spider-creature wary. Garnet was still staying to the edges of the fight, and with lightning reflexes and rocket gauntlets, there was no way the monster was going to anywhere close enough to do damage. The human boy was slow and unable to fight back, but by now he’d also ran out of range, and there were two other fighters between the monster and him.

Then there was Pearl. She had her spear, but throwing it had proved to be ineffective at piercing the monster’s hard skeleton, and it had realized that she didn’t want to fight at close range...

It turned on her.

It came in a rush, stampeding at her like a bull. Pearl flipped to the left, but the monster was surprisingly dexterous, and it matched her turn. Then it leapt straight over her head, using the height to shoot web right down below her. She twisted and dodged, though a few flecks of white goo splattered onto her face. Pearl wiped it off irritably, already feeling it starting to harden. The monster landed a few feet away, turned to face her; she summoned her spear, and smacked it away, before jumping back once more.

The creature began to advance on her once more- only to be knocked into the air as another pain of rocket gauntlets landed in the air by its feet, the explosion propelling it straight up into the air. Perhaps it had seen those projectile’s coming, because it didn’t seem at all uncomfortable from being suddenly lifted up into the air. It merely twisted it’s body, and used it as an opportunity to shoot yet another web at Pearl.

This one hit.

It wasn’t a direct hit. In retrospect, a direct hit would have been far preferable; as uncomfortable as taking a sticky swab of silk to the head or chest would have been, it couldn’t have really done anything, since there wouldn’t have been anything for it to stick to. Instead, it struck her in the foot, where it immediately began to harden, holding her in the spot.

She was anchored in place, unable to run or dodge. She tugged desperately at her leg, taking her spear and hacking at the glue, but it was harder than rock. The monster knew it had the advantage, and was running towards her; out of the corner of her eye, she could see her friends moving, trying to come to her defense, but the monster was so fast, and Amethyst’s hastily thrown whip hit the monster at an angle where it merely bounced off, harmless...

The monster was bearing down on her now; so close, close enough that Pearl's keen eyesight could make out the individual hairs on it's carapace, and all she could wonder was how much of her memories she would lose, and hope that her friends would be able to defeat the monster and return them to her-

“PEARL!” she heard the boy scream- she couldn't help but feel bitter at the sound, it was his fault she was in this mess-

-but then, suddenly, the boy was jumping between her and the monster, and she wasn’t bitter, she was angry. She had done this to protect him, and now he was just throwing his safety away! The monster was now coming right at him, pincers wide open, and maybe it wouldn't just settle for wiping memories- maybe it would bite his head clean off-

But when the monster dived in, instead of hitting human flesh, it hit a bright pink shield.

Rose's shield, glittering brightly on Steven's arm.

The monster squealed from the pain of the impact, falling backwards. “STAY AWAY!” the boy
roared at it.

The blow to the head truly seemed to be enough to shake the monster. It stood there, confused, finally providing its opponents with the opening they needed. Amethyst flung her whip, and it hit, wrapping around the monster and binding it. With it's lies bound, it slumped to the ground, but it didn't give up. It tried to crawl away, but Garnet had appeared. Large and imposing, she blocked off any escape.

Pearl knew this last part was her job. With one more blow, her spear managed to break the glue which held her in place. She broke free and pushed the boy aside. She stared down at the Obsidian, and saw what must be its only weak spot. Then she plunged the spear downwards, right at it's head.

There was some resistance, but she summoned her strength and pushed down, and the spear managed to break through the exoskeleton, into the softer 'flesh' beneath. The creature's eyes seemed to dim, and then, with a *poof*, its body vanished, the black gemstone clattering to the ground.

Steven rushed forward, hesitated for a moment, then tenderly picked the gem up.

The Crystal Gems merely stood there, waiting.

Nothing happened.

“Uh,” Amethyst said after a long moment. It was mostly deadpan, but there was a definite edge of panic to her voice. “Aren't our memories supposed to come back? Because mine aren't.”

“They- they are,” Pearl said. The documents had been very clear; upon destruction of the physical body, the effects of the memory alteration were to reverse instantly. The researchers had conducted *three* separate trials on the subject. Surely she couldn't have misunderstood them?

She looked towards Garnet, who just stared back, face like stone.

Steven was watching them, eyes wide, fallen gemstone still held in palms.

“They- they- *have to come back*!” Pearl said, words bubbling out of her mouth. Her gem glowed white; she twirled around, and after a moment, the scrolls appeared, suspended in the air. She clutched at them, and began to read through the furiously. Perhaps they had missed something.

Garnet moved forward, laid a hand on her shoulder. “Pearl.”

“Don't *Pearl* me,” she snapped. “There has to be a way to fix this, and I *am* going to find it.”

Amethyst looked away, face half-disappearing behind her long bangs. Garnet's lips were pressed together, her hands clutched into fists. “Pearl, maybe the scrolls were wrong,” she said. “They may have been outdated, or the corruption may have affected the Obsidian's abilities. It may be permanent,” she concluded.

And something inside Pearl seemed to break.

“You mean, this is *it*?” she asked, indignant. “We're just going to give up? We're just going to accept this? Accept that we've lost our memories? Accept that Rose is gone, that she's *dead*? That she left with no explanation, and all she left behind was this- this *human*?” She gestured wildly at the boy, who released a small gasp.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he didn't look at Pearl. He didn't look at any of them. Instead, he gazed down at the smooth black gem he held in his hand. Suddenly, a small pink
bubble blossomed in his hands, encapsulating the stone a perfect sphere. He stared at it for a moment longer, then it vanished with a small pop.

Finally, he looked up. There were tears in his eyes, and his cheeks were wet.

“I'm- I'm sorry,” he said. “I'm sorry- but- but- it's not my fault, okay?! It's not my fault you guys lost your memories, it's not my fault you can't get them back and it's- it's not my fault that I'm here, alright? It's not my fault that Mom- that Rose- that she-”

The words broke off, and after one last look at assembled Crystal Gems, Steven ran away, towards the warp pad. They saw him stand on it, saw him vanish in the bright beam of light; none of them moved to stop him.

She had just made a human child cry. She had made Rose's child cry. That was- bad. Pearl realized that. She also realized that she should probably be feeling guilty. Somehow, she couldn't quite manage it.

oOoOoOo

When the boy fled, they were left with silence. Heavy, pained silence, filled only by their thoughts.

It occurred to Garnet that it was almost certainly her job to break it. Somehow, without Rose Quartz there, she'd fallen into the role of the leader. It was only natural, after all. She was the eldest, she was the fusion, therefore she was the one to take command. And she was willing to do so. But it was one thing, for missions and battles. She could handle those.

But this? She hadn't the faintest idea what to say. Neither did Ruby or Sapphire, for that matter. This was beyond all of them.

So she said nothing.

What should they do now? They couldn't return to the Temple, not yet. That would mean seeing Steven, but he clearly didn't want to see them. It seemed to her that he deserved some space. It was probably best for the others, as well- right now, more interaction with the half-human boy would not be helpful. They would have to return to the Temple eventually, of course, but for the moment they needed distance.

But they couldn't remain here, surely? There's was just something so...unsettling about the Dome of Knowledge.

Perhaps they could warp to Rose's Garden? Pay their respects?

She felt a heavy lurch at the thought of Rose, at the thought of her being gone. Rose, so bold, and brave, and beautiful. Rose, who had stood up for what was right. Rose, who had accepted those that all others had rejected. Rose, who always knew what to do.

What would she say right now?

'Don't give up.'

Yes, that would be what Rose would say. She hadn't given up, not once, had she? She hadn't given up in her fight against the Homeworld, even though they'd been desperately outnumbered and outgunned. Neither had she given up in her search to find a cure for the corruption, even as the centuries had dragged on, and the monsters had remained just that, despite her best efforts.
But was there any other option? Pearl could go through the research notes again, but it had said that the Obsidian's memory effects would be reversed if it was forced back into its gem. They had destroyed the Obsidian's physical body, but-

-wait.

Some part of her was telling her to wait, to look again, to think. It was Sapphire's perception. She'd noticed something. Garnet wasn't even sure what, but she had noticed it, and it was important-

Obsidian. Obsidian. They'd destroyed the Obsidian's body.

Haven't they?

Garnet thought hard, reflecting on the description Pearl had given her of the gem. She went through it all. Black. Made from a volcano-Kindergarten. Only two produced. Very simple program. Large number of side-effects...

Stop, go back to that last one. Very simple program?

The Gem that had attacked them...it's design hadn't seemed simple at all. It had been an excellent fighter, strong and quick, and with a high degree of cleverness, even with its mind so clouded. Furthermore, it had had a very useful power; the ability to produce and shoot a durable, sticky 'webbing' which could be used to trap others. But Pearl had said that the Obsidian code had been extremely streamlined, all but the most essential skills and abilities replaced with programming for the memory alteration power. Surely that meant that the Obsidian couldn't have also possessed a power as complex as web generation?

Her mind was racing in a million different directions, putting the pieces together. “Pearl,” she said suddenly, startling the other Gem, who'd become lost in her thoughts. “You said that they assigned Obsidian with a guard. Did the document specify what kind?”


Garnet held up a hand. Onyx. Yes, she'd met an Onyx, back on Homeworld- or rather, Ruby had. She'd been a very new Gem model, stout and muscular, quiet and serious in temperament. Designed for law enforcement and guard work. Black skin, grey hair, bright green eyes.

She needed to be sure.

“Did those documents include any physical descriptions of the Obsidian gems?”

Pearl was thoroughly confused now, as was Amethyst, but they seemed to respond to her commanding tone. “Yes, as well as detailed sketches of them, from several different angles. Would you like to-?”

“I'd like to see them, yes.” Pearl nodded, and rifled through the scrolls quickly, before handing her one and leading Garnet to the relevant figures. Garnet stared at them. The differences were immediately obvious. The Gems depicted here were shiny and black, yes, but they were also sharp and angular, concentric lines rippling across their surface. The gemstone of the monster they'd just fought, which the boy had held in his hand, had been smooth and rounded.

“That monster we just fought,” she said, at last. “It wasn't Obsidian at all. It was almost certainly its guard, an Onyx.”

The two smaller Gems gaped, then questions and confusion came spilling out. Garnet explained,
telling the facts, seeing if either of them would have noticed something which would contradict the conclusion she'd come to. They didn't. Instead, a joy spread across their faces.

“So that means-” Amethyst began.

“That the Obsidian is still out there!” Pearl finished, waving an arm triumphantly. “We can still get our memories back!”

“Exactly,” Garnet said.

Chapter End Notes

Well...this chapter ends in a kinda weird place, but c'est la vie. The alternatives were "depressing downer ending" and "yeah, no, ten thousand words is too long for a single chapter”.

Who's feeling hyped for Steven Bomb 2.0?

Interesting Background Information: Onyx is a relatively common gemstone found around the world. While the black variety is perhaps the best well known, it comes in a wide number of colours, and is most distinctively known for it's bright banding patterns.
The realization that the monster they'd just defeated had been an Onyx, not the Obsidian, sent fresh hope through the Crystal Gems— a chance to succeed in their mission, to reclaim their lost memories. But there was still much to do before that could be achieved.

“Alright,” Amethyst said, when the initial rush of excitement had died down. “But where's this Obsidian, then? We gotta find it before we can destroy it.”

Behind her visor, Garnet closed all three of her eyes. She focused, listened, reaching out to sense all other Gems nearby. She had to push past her own awareness of self; past the comforting familiarity of Amethyst and Pearl; and there, distant and very quiet, another presence. It felt angry and confused, like so many of the other corrupted Gems, but also scared.

She could feel, in a distant and general sense, where it was. Garnet peered into the future, saw the possibilities, to confirm. Finally, she knew she could find the Obsidian.

To do that, the Crystal Gems returned once again to the Dome of Knowledge. Instead of digging through the entrance Garnet had purposely destroyed in the fight, they made their way to the other side of the Dome, to another ramp which was unblocked. Garnet was the one who lead them this time, knowing where to go through the guidance of her future vision. As they walked in silence, with their weapons out, just in case, Garnet thought things over, trying to untangle the sequence of events which had lead up to all of this.

It must have started all the way back to the final days of the war. Most of the workers at the Dome would have fled, or at least tried to— they knew danger was coming, knew they should leave the planet before it was too late. But not the Onyx, who was solid and dependable, dedicated to her duty. She had been assigned as the keeper of the Obsidian, who had such a mighty power that Homeworld could not afford to lose it. Even as all the other Gems had evacuated, she had stayed at her post, besides her charge. Then the corruption had came, transforming them both...

The corruption twisted, warped, but it did not completely change. Something of the original Gems remained in the monsters the corruption left behind. Garnet always tried not to dwell on it too much, but she could always feel semblances of the Gems' true personalities in the monsters they had to fight. And you could also tell that there was some distant memory of motivation in their behaviour. That was the reason that Gem monsters were constantly seeking out the Temple. They could feel its power, and knew it was important, though they didn't understand how or why.

So this Onyx had lost almost everything in to corruption, but it had still remembered the Obsidian. Remembered that its job was to prevent it from escaping, and also to protect it from harm.

So then what had happened? Garnet recalled the broken cage they passed during their initial exploration of the Dome, the one with the dry, papery substance on the ground. Old web, surely. That cage must have previously been the Obsidian's prison cell. The creature had been left there as prisoner for five thousand years, long enough that finally, the corrupted Obsidian must have found a way to break out. And that had riled up the Onyx, which was still guarding it, all these centuries later...

And then the Crystal Gems had come to the Dome. Why they had done so, Garnet did not
remember. But they must have stumbled upon the Obsidian; come into physical contact, awakening its power; woken up with thirteen years' worth of lost memories. And when they had returned on a mission to restore them, the Onyx had attacked, angry that these interlopers had come back once more...

Garnet was interrupted from her thoughts when finally, they found the Obsidian.

It was hiding in one of the smaller rooms the Crystal Gems hadn't had a chance to investigate in their earlier exploration. It was one of the few areas in the complex designed for leisure. There were mirrors on the walls in some attempt to make the tiny space seem larger and more luxurious. In the centre of the room stood a rather abstract statue, depicting what Garnet thought was meant to be a solar system, presumably there as a conversation piece. Scattered around the statue, positioned for individuals to sit and view it, were about ten different pillows, in colours which once must have been bright and vibrant, but were now tired and faded.

The corrupted gem monster had grabbed one of these pillows, and carried it into a corner, where it used it as an undersized bed. The moment the Gems arrived, seeing their weapons and understanding their intent, the creature pressed itself back even farther into the corner, cowering.

It was small. Or...no, that wasn't entirely accurate. The creature was nearly as large as Pearl, but it gave the impression of being small. It was diminutive. Yes, that was the correct term. It was long and thin, with an ashy grey body, and six segmented pairs of black legs. The front two, which would have been hands in its former life, and still had five finger-like claws at the end, were bound closely together by a pair of rusty metallic handcuffs. If it wasn't for the middle pair of legs which the monster's body had sprouted when it had transformed, the creature probably would not have been capable of walking at all. Draped over its body, like faded silk, were the papery remains of the web-cocoon that the Onyx must once have used to keep the Obsidian bonded; once it must have covered almost its entire body, preventing any unintended physical contact. Over time, that webbing had dried up, and the Obsidian had broken mostly free. A pair of wings had even sprouted on its back, straight through the tattered silk, thin and glittering silver. They fluttered uselessly, too tiny to actually allow the creature to fly.

The most striking thing about the monster, however, was its face. It was thin and pointed, with two large, circular compound eyes. They were bright orange in colour, but they also seemed to glow with reds and yellows, as though magma moved just beneath their surface. And then there was its mouth...

Simply put, it didn't have one.

Or rather, where anyone else would have had a mouth, was its gem. It was jet black, cut in an odd, irregular shape, curved upwards like a malformed arrow-head. The shape gave the eerie impression that the creature did have a mouth, which was open in a silent scream.

Garnet shook off that irrational thought off, and directed her teammates to move in. They did so, weapons out, cutting off all routes for the insect-like creature to escape.

It was not hard for them to take the monster down. The Obsidian was not a warrior like the Onyx had been. Perhaps that was why it had remained in the Dome of Knowledge, even after breaking free of its cage; perhaps it had realized there were any number of organic predators out in the jungle which would attempt to make a meal of it. It was not particularly strong for a Gem, nor was it quick. When it jumped at them in a futile attempt to fight back, the Crystal Gems didn't even let it get close. Amethyst was able to hit it mid-air with her whip, and it fell to the ground, completely bound.

It lay on the floor, twitching and struggling, staring up at them with wide orange eyes. Garnet couldn't help but feel a twinge of pity for the creature, even though it had caused them so much
trouble. It may have wiped and destroyed the minds of many Gems in the past, but it had never willingly chosen to do so— it had merely been a tool, a weapon, to be used by the Homeworld. It had been a captive from the moment it was created, and now it was going to be a captive again.

Well. There was no other option.

Pearl drew her spear high, then plunged it into the creature's back, right between the wings. The spear slid through its exoskeleton like it was butter. The creature tensed in pain, but it didn't scream, didn't make a sound— it had no mouth, after all.

The body vanished. The remaining black gemstone fell to the floor with a quiet clatter. Garnet stepped forward to grab it—

—and then the memories hit.

They weren't painful. Rather, they were simply overwhelming.

Thirteen years worth of memories, streaming into the Gems' heads all at once. For Garnet, it was even more than thirteen years; it was also memories of every single future vision she'd seen during that time, pouring through her mind in a single instant. Not just the things she'd seen, but the sounds, the smells, the emotions, the pain, everything...

**Rose tossing Amethyst up in the air, catching the younger Gem as she giggled on the beach— A monstrous lizard creature with a bright red Gem, spitting flames at the tiny human town, Garnet barreling down on it as the others tried to find a way to smother it's fire- Greg offering her a bag of chips- Pearl presenting her with a sword, and Garnet taking it, even though she's never had much talent with the weapon, because Rose is busy and Pearl wants a new practice opponent anyway—**

Garnet gasped under the deluge of scenes. Dimly, she was aware of the real, present world around her. She could see Amethyst on her knees, and Pearl, threatening to topple over, reaching towards the wall for support, but it was so hard to focus...

**Rose calling them all for a meeting, her face solemn and joyous at the same time, hand splayed across her belly— “Greg and I are going to have a child!” — confusion and clapping and baffled happiness— Greg, sheepish and proud, showing off a human book, 'What To Expect When You're Expecting-' Garnet resting a hand on Rose's stomach, feeling a slight flutter against Sapphire's gemstone, the baby's kicking— how can Rose even have a baby? A Gem/Human hybrid, it sounds impossible— “Even I don't fully know. But I suspect that I may not survive. That the child will receive my gemstone”—**

- screaming, yelling, tears— “You can't do this to us!” someone cries, is it Pearl or is it Amethyst, she can't tell, maybe it's both- Garnets' standing very still, not letting herself react- she's at the top of the mountain, by the lighthouse, the smell of salt in the air and stars in the sky above- Rose is at her side, it's just the two of them, and she lets herself cry for the first time since she heard the news— “You're certain, then?” - The three of them, they corner Greg in his apartment, demanding that he stops this, “She'll listen to you!” - Greg's crying even as he speaks— “I've already spoken to her, but she wants the baby”— “Talk to her again!” - “It's her choice”—

**There has to be a reason, Rose always has a reason, but if there is one, she isn't sharing- Rose is becoming bigger all the time, growing too as the life inside her grows- they're all so busy now, it takes a lot to get ready for a baby, they need to buy tiny clothes and tiny toys- Garnet has no idea how to be a parent, none of them do, they don't have instincts for it, not like the humans- she reads Greg's book cover to cover, and she's left feeling more overwhelmed than ever- Rose stops going on**
missions, she can't risk hurting the baby, and it's just Garnet, and Amethyst, and Pearl, and soon, it's only ever going to be the three of them- “No, it'll be the four of you. You'll have Steven, too.” - “Yes, Greg picked it out. It's a nice, human name. It means 'crown', apparently”- Garnet throws herself into the missions, enjoying the simplicity of the fights-

Finally, the day comes- Rose Quartz is tired and scared, but also joyful and ready- she doesn't cry, even when all her family does- she says goodbye to them, one by one- she's gasping from the pain- her last words are, “Believe in Steven”-

The baby is tiny and red and wrinkly, and it screams and screams and screams, how can such a tiny thing make so much noise?- Greg takes it to his apartment, armed with diapers and milk formula and a cradle- they don't see him for several days, Garnet doesn't even see the other Gems in that time, they've all gone off to mourn in their own way- when they do visit again, there are large black circles under Greg's eyes, he looks more exhausted and haggard than they've ever seen him- the baby cries all through the night, and neither it nor his father have been getting much sleep- Garnet decides then and there that the Gems will be taking over the night shifts, they don't need to sleep, after all-

Garnet learns how to hold the baby, not just so that she doesn't accidentally crush him, but so that it's actually comfortable- she sings songs, old songs she hasn't sung for centuries, to lull him to sleep- Pearl takes over from there, lifting the child from Garnet's arms and carrying him to his crib- for so long Pearl refused to even look at the child, but now she never leaves his side when he sleeps, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest for hours- Amethyst takes over when the baby begins to cry- gives him his bottles, burps him, changes diapers- tosses him up in the air, making Greg yelp-

In the there and now, Pearl and Amethyst were making strange, strangled noises, almost like they were in pain, but Garnet was just lost and confused as them, there was nothing she could do to help...

Time seems to slow down for them, living on a human's schedule- but it seems to go so fast too- the child's growing so quickly- first he's crawling, then he's walking, then he's speaking- not really speaking, just nonsense and babble, but Greg speaks back nonetheless and the Gems follow his lead- eventually there are words too, like 'apple' and 'doggy' and 'peepee'- the day he says her name for the first time, Garnet feels as though she might swell with pride and love- he runs down the beach, sand flying, and she wonders how happy Rose would be, to see her son-

- sometimes, she feels more split between the two worlds than ever before- humanity is so set apart from the Gems which nearly destroyed them- they try to keep Steven away from it all, but he sees them fight on the beach one day, and there are stars in his eyes- this is his destiny, his legacy, and there's still something to be proud of in that- his powers start coming, his gem glowing at odd moments, who knows how they'll manifest- they've been building a human house around the Temple, preparing for this day, and it seems it's finally time- he falls asleep listening to his father read, and then Greg leaves-

- crushed, swallowed, drowned, burnt, bleeding- she sees these possibilities in her head, every time Steven begs to come on a mission- he's so small and fragile and he doesn't even realize- there's Rose's shield, hovering in the air, and it's his shield now- he has to learn eventually- they start him off small, test him, build him up- watch him like a hawk- he gets stronger and faster every time-

- which is good- he's going to need those skills- the Red Eye hovers in the sky- they destroy it, in a glorious pink explosion- but Garnet doesn't like it, not at all- and then there's the sentient mirror- a towering pillar of water, crashing down from the atmosphere- “I healed her Gem, and she flew away!”- “What does this mean for us?”- nothing good, Garnet's sure- Steven gets so scared by the strangest things, a monster in the warp stream, preposterous- Steven floating in the void, his body
frozen and lifeless, and its all her fault, she should have listened- she dives out of the Future Vision, knowing what she has to do- she catches him, hugs him, makes him as warm as possible- there's a new Gem at the Galaxy Warp, a Peridot, and she's repaired it- a fleet of invading ships, and only four Crystal Gems left to fight them- their Gems all lying on the ground, cracked- the Earth sucked dry of organic life- she can't let it happen, she won't- Garnet shatters the pad beneath her fists-

The noises her friends were making, Garnet realized- it's sobbing and laughter and groans of pain and screams of terror, all at once, because their minds were so overloaded and they were trying to express every emotion at once. She was doing it too, she suddenly recognized- she felt the dampness of tears on her own cheeks-

-and the memories were still coming-

-they've fused, the two children have fused, and Stevonnie's so happy and so beautiful and Garnet's grinning, she can't help herself- she remembers her first time, when the embrace between Ruby and Sapphire became so tight that it disappeared completely and she came into existence- Steven's growing so quickly, she can hardly believe it- “Thank you so much for doing this for me. You guys are the best”- he's on the roof, tears streaming down his face, terrified- she never should have told him about Future Vision- but he comes around, he understands- she kisses Steven on the forehead, and she shows him, really shows him-

- there are pods coming from space, one almost every day now, and they can't stop them all- they're deep underneath the Kindgergarten, in the control room- Peridot knows they're here now, there's no hiding anymore- “Please, don't put up a fight, it will only lead to devastation!”- but they have to fight, they have to- even if they're outnumbered, even if the enemy's technology is leagues beyond their own, even if their leader is gone- the green ship appears in the sky, and they know it's time- they send Steven away, maybe he'll get to have a full, human life before the invasion begins in earnest- Amethyst and Pearl dance, more perfectly and more synchronized than they have in years, and despite everything, it's beautiful- Opal's arrows fly true, but they do nothing, nothing at all- and Steven is here- she has to protect him- she can't-

- Rose's shield-

- Garnet sees the hit coming, doesn't bother to dodge, she can take it- pain- then she feels her body breaking, dissolving, can feel the bond breaking- the last thing she sees is Steven's horrified face-

In the present, her body glowed, form wobbling, and she screamed in three voices as Ruby and Sapphire and Garnet all tried to stay together-

-she wakes up all alone- she wakes up all alone- Ruby reaches out on instinct, but no one's there, no one at all- Sapphire looks around, but the cell is empty, of course it is- she tries not to panic- she begins to sing, hoping someone will hear it, bring comfort- and there's Steven, and Ruby's a mess, he never should have met her like this- but he's out- can she get out too?- running, running, have to find Sapphire- she has no idea where to the go, the future is impenetrable- she leaves Steven behind with Lapis, Garnet would never do that, but she's not Garnet- they need to be Garnet- Sapphire needs to keep singing, no matter how much Jasper threatens, has to let Ruby know she's still here- and there's Steven, beautiful little Steven, although like this he doesn't seem so little at all- his dual nature, of course- that voice- RUBY- SAPPHIRE-.

She's even more beautiful than she remembered- Sapphire kisses away her tears- Ruby picks her up, twirls her around- there's nothing quite like the dance- and they're back, she's back- Garnet's herself again- she cups Steven's face in her hands- sets him off to save the others- “And I'm stronger than
“you” - Jasper is going down-

- and she does go down, along with the ship- Garnet wraps her fellow Crystal Gems in her arms, all united again, Steven's bubble appearing around them, and they brace for impact- “I can't believe you're a fusion all the time!” - Jasper taking Lapis by the hand, twirling her into a dance- a monstrosity of a fusion coalescing into existence, they didn't even manage to beat Lapis on her own, what can they possibly do against this?- the terrible fusion being pulled under the waves, screaming, body rippling- Garnet is made of love, and this thing is made of hate, and she can't even begin to fathom how terrible an existence that being is in for-

- but they did it- the planet is safe for now- there's wreckage strewn all across the beach- who knows what harm it could do to a human- they need to collect it, study it- Peridot could have landed anywhere- a green flare, bright in the sky- the escape pod, firing on helpless humans- Garnet wrangles the pod towards her, flushed with victory- she's felt threatened for so long, now it's time to turn the tables- she raises her fist, ready to strike- “STOP! Steven's in there!” - his little body, curled inwards- would he have died immediately, or burned up as the craft was launched back into the atmosphere?- she nearly killed him- he's not just a Gem, he's a child, they need to remember that- they need to find Lapis and Jasper- does this human youth truly think he's in love?- they need to track down Peridot- they need to find the Slinker-

Garnet gasped, reaching for reality like a drowning swimmer reaches for water-

- Amethyst's new form is clearly unstable, why can't she be patient?- Amethyst wants her approval, but Garnet's not sure how to give it, this has never come easily to her, not like it did to Rose- she spends hours each day with her third eye open, searching for possibilities- there's an unknown energy reading coming from the Dome of Knowledge- it could be Peridot, and they can't risk her accessing the technology housed there- they wave Steven off to his little parade, thankful that they don't need to invent an excuse for him not to join them on this particular mission- they find no sign of Peridot, but an alarm is blaring, so something must have activated it- it's interfering with local human satellite signals, they have to find a way to shut it off- a tiny black gem-monster, not aggressive at all, but best that they deal with it anyway- Garnet reaches out a hand, intending to snap its fragile body in half- a strange numbness up her hand, into her very gems- everything's fading, going white- she tries to hold on-

Finally, the real world solidified around her, the memories settling back into their proper places. Garnet blinked away tears. Somehow, during it all, she had ended up on her knees. She forced herself to back onto her feet, swaying unsteadily. The others were doing the same, she noticed- Amethyst was clutching at her head, Pearl was leaning with her back against a wall, staring at the plain white ceiling above. They looked exhausted and overwhelmed, but unharmed.

Garnet inspected her own body, just to ensure that she was uninjured as well. Physically, she did seem fine, but she found her form was warbling slightly, still unstable from the intensity of the memory restoration. She closed her eyes, and recalling a meditative trick of the humans, counted to ten while taking deep breaths; in and out. When she finished, she felt leagues more stable, more whole.

She looked down at the floor. The obsidian gem was still lying there, next to the pillow, right where it had fallen when its body was destroyed. It wouldn't do to leave it there much longer, in case its body regenerated more quickly than expected, but Garnet hesitated before reaching for it. Could its powers possibly be activated when dormant? That was highly unlikely, but Garnet still summoned her gauntlets before picking the gem up. Then she encased it in a red bubble, and warped it off to the Temple, to join the rest.
The fusion turned back to her teammates. They seemed better, as well. Amethyst even managed a grin. “We did it! We got our memories back!”

Pearl responded with a wan smile of her own, as did Garnet. As foolish as she felt for having underestimated the Obsidian monster, leading to them having their memories wiped in the first place, regaining them was truly an achievement to be proud of. And to be relieved about. What if they hadn't been able to do so? They would probably never have been able to untangle the secrets to the technology they'd recovered from the fallen spaceship, or been able to continue the search for Peridot, and then of course, there would have been poor Steven-

Garnet's thoughts stopped dead in their tracks.

She saw the expressions on Pearl's and Amethyst's faces morph into what had to be a perfect reflection of her own. They all stared at each other. Finally, their minds had truly managed to catch up with the current events; perspective shifted, and they understood, with with perfect clarity, everything that had happened over the past day. Exhaustion and satisfaction melted away, to be replaced pure horror and guilt.

“Steven,” the three Crystal Gems said, as one.

Chapter End Notes

Quick update this time! Thank you to everyone for your awesome support and feedback, it really means a lot. <3

Interesting Side Information: I've had the image of the Obsidian (both it's monster and humanoid form) in my head for weeks, but it was only recently that I realized what my subconscious inspiration for it must have been. It's 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Steven arrived back home, his room was empty. No Dad, no Lion, no anybody.

He was glad. No, not glad, relieved. If they were there, he'd have to explain what had just happened, and he wasn't even sure how to start. How could he tell them that their mission had failed? That he'd nearly gotten Pearl's mind zapped by a giant spider? That they had thought they'd found a way to get the Gems' memories back, but that it hadn't worked, and that it now seemed as though their memories were gone for good?

That the Gems all hated him now?

"It's not my fault," he said again, in a quiet voice, almost as though he was trying to convince himself. The words came our hoarse. He was crying in earnest, now; he'd given up trying to hold the tears back about halfway through the warp ride home.

When he'd fled the Dome, Steven hadn't actually been sure he wanted to go home. He'd simply gone there on instinct. However, when he'd been standing on that warp pad it had occurred to him that he didn't need to go back to the Temple. If he wanted, he could go anywhere. Even now, he still had that choice.

It was appealing. It really was. Eventually, the Gems would have to return, and he really didn't feel like seeing them when they did.

But at the moment, he didn't care much about 'eventually'. He couldn't muster up the energy. Right then, he just wanted to sleep.

He dragged himself across the room, up the stairs, and collapsed onto his unmade bed. It was still sunny out, probably not even afternoon yet, but Steven didn't care. He'd hardly slept at all the previous night. After Amethyst had run out while they were making dinner, he'd felt terrible and restless- he hadn't know what he'd done wrong, to make her suddenly look so horrified. He'd forced himself to finish cooking the mini-pizzas, and then to eat them, even though it had felt like he was swallowing wet cardboard. He had made himself get into pyjamas, and brush his teeth, like he did every night. But even though it had been super late by that point, when he'd finally gotten into bed, he'd just found himself tossing and turning, unable to sleep. He'd just kept thinking about the Crystal Gems, worrying and wondering, until he'd realized he had to do something to try to help them. He'd gotten out of bed, and buzzed busily around the room, collecting anything that he thought my jog his friends' memories; toys, photographs, gifts...

None of it had worked. Whatever had affected the Gems', it seemed that it couldn't be fixed by a simple stroll down memory lane. But even after Garnet had gone back into the Temple (without even saying goodnight), he'd still hadn't been able to fall asleep. Instead, he'd merely laid there, eyes wide open.

He'd stayed like that until Dad had arrived in the morning, with that kind of forced supportive, cheery attitude that Steven was becoming better and better at recognizing. And knowing how difficult all this was for him, Steven had done his best to smile in return. He had hidden his exhaustion, didn't say a thing about what had happened after Greg had left the previous night, and poured himself breakfast as usual. He kept that same cheerfulness up when the Crystal Gems had
emerged from the Temple to announce their plan.

And really, this whole day, he hadn't felt tired at all. In so many ways, everything had seemed like one of their usual adventures; exploring ancient ruins, solving puzzles, fighting monsters... Between the stress and the thrill of the mission, it had been easy for the young boy to push everything out of his mind and focus on the matter at hand.

But stress and adrenaline can only carry a body so far before it crashes.

Now that crash had hit, hard, and there was nothing Steven could do to fight it. He only had enough energy left to fall onto the bed and wrap himself in the duvet to block out the sunlight. Still sniffling, he closed his eyes, and drifted off into an uneasy, uncomfortable sleep...

It was not a restful slumber. Steven slipped into one of those places between true sleep and wakefulness, where thought and dreams drifted together, intertwining in strange ways. He thought of Pearl, pointing an accusing finger at him, calling him a 'human'- and suddenly, Pearl was replaced by Peridot, her face sneering down at him from the giant monitor in the depths of the Kindergarten...Amethyst pulling her way out of a hole shaped just like her, along with hundreds of other Gems, who were nothing but strange, vague shadows in his imagination...

...those shadows warped and twisted, taking on on depth, resolving themselves into familiar shapes...one was a giant puffer-fish, surrounded by a terrible wailing storm which threatened to blow everything away. Another was a huge glowing worm, chasing after him through dark waters. Then there was a large, serpentine creature, with segmented legs, a pair of pincers for a tail, and a mane of white hair...

...but it wasn't a monster at all, just the centipeetle, tiny and scared, the light draining out of its Gem as its body was destroyed...

...Steven sat on the ground, its spherical green Gem cupped in his hands. He'd willed it to regenerate. It hadn't. Instead, it had just suddenly vanished, leaving the boy holding nothing but air. He turned to the Gems for comfort; but the cave he was sitting it was completely empty. The others had left him, and in the distance, he could hear their whispers and the creaking of floorboards as they walked away.

Then even the walls of the cave seemed to vanish, melting away, leaving behind only the the vastness of space, huge and black, dotted by distant stars, Warp Steams all around him. He was so, so cold. And now, even the Warp Streams were disappearing, those brilliant pillars of light flickering out of existence. That darkness seemed even more immense, and he was no longer floating at all; he was falling, falling, too scared to even scream.

There was a gentle pop, and before him appeared a tiny pink whale. It asked him, in a calm voice, “What do you want, Steven?”

“I want to be back with the Gems!” he cried, reaching out and hugging the whale, which was suddenly much larger than he remembered it...

And a lot more solid.

Steven was aware, in a vague, distant way, that it hadn't been like this last time; that the whale had vanished into a puff of clouds in his arms. It didn't this time, and he didn't care. He just held on, thankful for its reassuring warmth.

And slowly, Steven's mind drifted back into consciousness. But even as his shallow sleep evaporated
and the world began to resolve, still he heard that whispering, and still he felt his arms wrapped around something soft and warm.

He lay there, blurry and confused, before opening his eyes. He couldn't see anything; his face was pressed right against something dark in colour. Tied up in his duvet which now felt like a net, he struggled to move backwards enough to get a good look at what he was seeing. It was some sort of greyish fabric...although it had this darker patch shaped like a... like a star.

- He threw himself backwards with a strangled little squeak when his sleepy mind finally managed to put it together. He'd been hugging Amethyst.

“Hey, hey,” Amethyst said, reaching out a hand like someone might do to a frightened animal. “It's okay.”

He stared at her, blinking. “Amethyst?”

“Yeah. Hey.”

He was still staring, trying to piece things together- trying to understand why she was sitting on his bed, and how long he'd been asleep, and why she'd let him hug her, when before she hadn't even-well-

He heard voices from the floor below.

“What's that? Is he awake?” Pearl hissed in that kind of whisper a person uses when they want to both be heard and not heard at the same time.

“Yeah, he's up,” Amethyst called back, in a farm more regular tone. Not that much more regular, however. She still hadn't taken her eyes away from the boy, and was wearing this sort of concerned frown which looked very out-of-place on her.

“I- what-” Steven stuttered, not even sure where to start.

“It's okay,” the Gem repeated. “I'm not gonna- freak out, or anything. I remember. We remember.”

“What?” Finally feeling properly awake, Steven managed to disentangle himself from the covers, fell clumsily off the bed, and crawled over to the ledge. He stared down at the other two Crystal Gems, who were in turn staring up worriedly at him. “Really?”

“Yes,” Pearl said. Besides her, Garnet nodded.

He turned to look back at Amethyst. “But..how? We poofed that monster, and it didn't do anything... Was there like, a delay, or something?”

The Crystal Gems quickly explained that they had realized that the monster they'd thought had not been Obsidian at all, and that their memories had returned when they had found and defeated their true target. Or rather, Garnet and Amethyst did. Pearl, usually the first to jump at the chance to provide explanations, was being uncharacteristically quiet. She'd twined one of her arms around Garnet's, like she so often did when nervous or stressed. In the other hand she was carrying a steaming mug which she was holding to her chest almost like a shield.

“So- it really worked?” Steven asked, once their story was complete. “You guys really remember everything?”

“Yes,” Garnet confirmed.
The boy's face split into a wide grin. He turned back to Amethyst, wrapped his arms around her and giving her a proper, intentional hug. The Gem hesitated for a moment, then hugged back. It was nice and comforting, but not nearly as firm as the crushing hugs that Amethyst usually gave. Steven broke out of it quickly, and went bounding down the stairs, moving to give celebratory cuddles to the other two.

When he arrived on the ground floor and headed towards them, however, Pearl grimaced. Garnet didn't, but it was still enough to make Steven hesitate. Instead of moving in for the intended hug, found himself hovering awkwardly in place, unsure of what to do.

The boy rallied quickly- or at least he tried to. “This is great! I'm really, really glad you're all okay-” he broke off, then brightened when a new course of action occurred to him. “Oh! I should go tell Dad! He'll be super happy!”

He spun around and began to head for the door at a walk which was just a little too brisk to be normal.

“This is great! I'm really, really glad you're all okay-” he broke off, then brightened when a new course of action occurred to him. “Oh! I should go tell Dad! He'll be super happy!”

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“Steven,” Garnet said. It was enough to stop the boy in his tracks. He looked back over his shoulder, smile faltering.

“We need to talk,” Garnet said simply. Steven opened his mouth to protest, but there was no room in her tone for argument.

In less than a minute, all the Gems- including the half human one- were sitting on the couch together. The tension was palpable. Amethyst was draped across the cushions in her usual sprawl, but she wasn't at all relaxed or comfortable. It wasn't hard to miss the way she was staring at the coffee table with an intensity which suggested that it was the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen. Pearl, like always, sat with perfect posture; legs crossed, back ram-rod straight. However, there was a tension in the way she held herself which was normally lacking. She still was still carrying the mug, but she looked as though she wasn't quite sure what to do with it. After a moment of deliberation, she passed it to Steven, who was sitting cross-legged between her and Amethyst. “For you,” she said, quickly.

The boy took the mug, sniffed at its contents, then took a sip. It was hot chocolate. Warm and sweet, with the subtle flavours and cinnamon, vanilla and nutmeg, it was obvious that Pearl was the one who had prepared it. While Amethyst and Garnet both lacked the patience to do anything more than heating milk and mixing in chocolate powder (and Amethyst sometimes just eating the powder herself), Pearl had always enjoyed the methods of cooking and the methodical measuring of ingredients, even if she disliked eating food herself. Steven took a longer sip, then smiled at her. Her shoulders stiffened even further. Steven looked away.

Garnet, who had called this discussion, now seemed to be struggling with how to start it. Finally, though, she asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

The three aliens looked at one another. They were not convinced in the slightest.

“We made you cry,” Garnet said, in a deceptively mild voice.

The child fidgeted. “Yeah, well-”

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The child fidgeted. “Yeah, well-”

“Don't lie,” Pearl said abruptly, leaning forward, nails biting into her knees. “I was the one who made Steven cry. He saved- well, not- or rather-and I.”

She choked on the words, shaking her head furiously. Steven sat frozen, unsure if he should try and
comfort her.

“It wasn't just you,” Amethyst said. “It's not like I was a whole lot of help, either.”

“Neither was I.” Garnet shifted, adjusting her visor. She did not take it off, but Steven knew she was now looking directly at him. “We all treated you very badly. I'm sorry.”

The other Gems murmured their agreements, Amethyst half-hiding behind her hair, Pearl looking like she was barely suppressing tears. Steven stared down into his mug of cocoa. Hours ago, when he'd fled from the Dome of Knowledge, he'd wanted nothing more than the Gems to say that, and to have their memories restored. Then, he thought, everything would go back to normal. But it hadn't been that simple, of course. Now Steven was floundering as he considered what to say.

“It's okay,” he said at last. “It's really...I mean, I know you guys couldn't remember me and stuff, so it's not really your fault. And anyway, you were kind of right. Mom would still be around, if it wasn't for me...”

Amethyst winced. Pearl's eyes went very wide. Garnet leaned forward. “Steven...”

“It's true,” Steven said. He leaned forward himself, looking Garnet directly in the face, almost challenging her or any of the others to disagree. “Mom died- or whatever- so I could be born.”

There was a pregnant pause.

“You've been thinking about this for a while, haven't you, Steven?” Pearl asked, in a quiet voice.

“Well. Yeah.” Steven could tell from her expression that she was thinking of that night in the strawberry battlefields, where they'd sat on a floating platform, and it had been as though a ghost of Rose Quartz had stood before them. But honestly, Steven had been wondering about this all long before that, ever since he'd first found the strange pink world in Lion's mane, and watched the video his mother had left him.

He'd never told the Gems about that message. It had felt special, meant just for him. Even though he'd shared it with Sadie, and later Connie, something had stopped him from telling his family. He could feel, deep in his gut, that right now wouldn't be the right time to mention it, either.

“It's just,” Steven continued, after a moment. “I know that you all loved my mom a lot, and that you really miss her. And that you must wish that she was here instead of me...”

He hadn't meant for those last words to come out. He hadn't planned them, or intended them, or even really realized he was saying them until they were already out.

“Don't say that!” Amethyst and Pearl cried in unison, too shocked to even notice that they'd done so.

'Why not? It's true,' some part of Steven thought mulishly. But he didn't say that. He just stared at them. Dimly, he realized he'd begun to tear up again.

Pearl managed to produce a tissue from somewhere, and dabbed at his face, rubbing away his tears with an odd mixture of tenderness and ferocity. “Oh, Steven,” she sighed. “I'm sorry- I'm sorry that I would ever make you think that-...You're so sweet, and kind, and brave...”

“And funny,” added Amethyst. “If it wasn't for you, I'd probably die of boredom. And also have, like, literally died. Or gotten shipped to the Homeworld, which would have been basically the same thing.”
Steven looked at her sidelong. It was true that he'd helped save them from the giant hand ship, but that wasn't anything special. “But my mom could have-”

“No, Amethyst is right,” Pearl said, and she hardly even frowned in distaste as those words passed her lips. “Rose Quartz was a wonderful warrior, but she was also a Gem. There probably wouldn't have been much she could have done against Jasper's advanced technology. It was your unique nature which saved us.”

Those words sent some sort of warmth flooding through Steven's chest.

That warmth was hardly enough to erase all his doubts, but Garnet seemed to sense that, and addressed them. “It's not just all of that,” she told him, wearing certainty like a cape. “It's true that we all loved Rose a great deal, and we wish she were still here. But love is not a competition. We also love you, Steven. We love you so, so much. And the thought of losing you, for any reason...”

She didn't continue, but then, she didn't need to. Steven smiled at Garnet, and at Amethyst, and Pearl, and he said, “I love you guys too.”

He still had concerns. And questions. Questions about his mother, and about the Homeworld, and about the rebellion, and what they were going to have to do now. But all of that could wait for another time. For now, he was content to put his mug down, open his arms wide open and ask, “Group hug?”

“Aww you,” Amethyst groaned, giving the boy a playful noogie which quickly transformed into the suggested hug. Pearl by-passed such rough housing, of course, but this time there was no hesitancy when she wrapped her arms around him, and held him close. A moment later, Garnet joined, taking all three of the Gems in her arms and squeezing tight. They sat like that, warm and secure and together, for a long time.

Finally, Steven began to squirm as he ran out of air. The embrace broke-apart, though none of them really went to move away. Amethyst even left an arm slung over Steven's shoulder, and Pearl was not-so-subtly looking the boy over from head-to-toe, checking to make sure he really was alright. Apparently, he didn't completely pass muster.

“You're shirt,” Pearl said, in that brisk tone of someone's who's secretly pleased to be able to change the subject, “is filthy. It's covered in mud and that horrible glue. Let's get you out of it this instant.”

Pearl tugged at it, pulling it off by the collar; usually Steven would have protested, being quite capable of undressing himself, after-all, but right now he let her fuss. “Oh, just look at this!” she bemoaned, holding the ruined shirt to her critical eye. “I don't know if I'll ever get this out! Bleach definitely won't do it, but I wonder if I might have a few solvents tucked away which will do the trick...

“Oh, and you're a mess too!” Pearl exclaimed, turning her eye back to the boy. “Shower time, right now.”

Well, Steven still had some dignity. “Aww, Pearl, c'mon...”

“Shower,” Pearl insisted.

“But I had one yesterday morning!”

“Yeah, come on, Pearl,” Amethyst said, pulling the boy closer. “What's wrong with a little dirt?”

This prompted a lecture from Pearl explaining what, exactly, was wrong with a little dirt- a lecture
which included keywords such as 'bacteria' and 'viruses' and 'objectively terrible smell'.

“Are you saying that I smell bad?” Amethyst growled, picking up on the subtext.

“I was referring specifically to humans,” Pearl said primly. “Although, in your case, I doubt that some lemon-mint shampoo would *hurt*.”

Discreetly, Steven began to inch away while they distracted. He was stopped by a hand on her shoulder. “Enough,” Garnet said, cutting through the arguments. “Steven, go shower. You'll feel better.”

That was that. The boy moaned, and made a show of dragging his feet as he made his way to the bathroom. But secretly, he was smiling.

This was nice.

Chapter End Notes

Incoming Steven Bomb...and incoming epilogue!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue

Greg was at the car wash, desperately trying to think of something to distract himself with.

When Steven and the Crystal Gems had left on their mission, Greg had intended to stick around the Temple. He really had. But it hadn't been easy, just sitting there, waiting for them all to return. It was like being at the hospital, not knowing when the doctors would call your name, and not not knowing what the results would be when they did.

So when over an hour had passed, and still the the warp pad had remained stubbornly inactive, Greg simply couldn't take it anymore. He'd headed back to Beach City proper, hoping to do something relatively useful to take his mind off things. He tried not to feel guilty about abandoning his 'post'. He wasn't helping anyone, just waiting there, and they'd know where to find him when they came back. (He refused to think about what would happen if they didn't come back.)

So the old rock-star had thrown himself into his work. Over a dozen cars, mostly belonging to visiting tourists leaving after the previous day's parade, had pulled up for a clean: he'd given them all the most enthusiastic wash he could muster. That had still left plenty of down time in between, so Greg had done what he could to stay busy. He'd gone and refilled all the soap machines. He'd adjusted that hose faucet which had sprung a leak a couple weeks back. He'd gone online and done some modding for a music forum he was a member of, frustrated by the surprisingly low level of troll activity that day. He'd pulled out his guitar and tried to compose, but of course his mind was in no place for that, and gave up quickly. Eventually he became so desperate that he'd happily went and updated that month's balance sheets.

But then he'd managed to finish off even that usually tedious chore, leaving Greg standing in front of his van, wondering if he'd finally found the motivation to tidy it up. He was just contemplating if he should begin by folding clothes when he was seized by the sudden urge to turn around.

It wasn't that he'd heard anything, or seen something just out of the corner of his eye- at least, not consciously. It was just as though some sixth, fatherly sense had gone and tapped him on the shoulder, telling him to look around. And when Greg did, he saw Steven.

The boy was making his way down the boardwalk, hand-in-hand with Pearl. Even at this distance it was clear that he was smiling. Relief made it feel as though Greg's stomach had leapt into his throat.

“Steven!” the man shouted, now smiling too, rushing to meet the pair. “Pearl! You're back! Did you do it? Are you all okay?"

“Yep, we're fine! The Gems all have their memories back!” the kid chirped, bouncing slightly as he launched into a story about the Amazon rainforest and scrolls and spiders, of which Greg understood only about a third. This was partially because of Steven's over-eager story-telling style, which often lead to him forgetting important details or going on meandering tangents, but Greg had the uncomfortable suspicion that there were also parts that the boy was deliberately omitting. He wondered what had happened that Steven now didn't want to share.

“Well,” Greg said when Steven's story finished. “I'm real glad that it all worked out.”
“Yes,” Pearl agreed, meeting his eyes.

Greg returned the alien's look. She had been smiling this entire time, and she still was- but whereas before it had been with that fond smile that she reserved almost exclusively for Steven, now it had a distinctly forced quality to it. Greg knew he wasn't the most perceptive guy around, but he could still tell that Pearl was trying to signal him. Asking to speak alone.

Considering everything that had happened, Greg wasn't feeling particularly eager about the idea, but he also recognized that his feelings didn't really matter in this case. So he just grinned, pulled out some bills from his wallet, and handed them to Steven, saying, “Hey kiddo, why don't you go grab us something to eat as celebration?”

Steven loved the idea and went running off towards the fry shack, just as expected. The two adults watched him go, waiting until he was out of hearing range.

“So,” Greg finally said in a low voice. “You've really gotten all your memories back?”

“Yes, as far as we can tell,” answered Pearl. She was still staring in the direction Steven had gone, not meeting his gaze. “Of course, the inherent nature of the condition means that it's impossible for us to know for sure, but the evidence suggests that they've all been restored.” She sighed. “Though not as quickly as we would have liked.”

Greg eyed Pearl. “...Did something happen?”

She ran a hand through her short peach hair. “We- I did some things that I...regret.”

Greg suppressed a wince. He could only imagine. “Is Steven okay?”

“I don't know,” the Gem answered. “I think so. I hope so. We talked to him, and...” she trailed off, shaking her head. She crossed her arms. “We think he's okay.

“But that's not- not what I wanted to talk about,” Pearl continued. “I actually- um- I wanted to say, I'm sorry.”

Greg blinked at her. “What?”

“I'm just- I'm sorry, for the things I said to you.” She looked deeply uncomfortable.

He knew the feeling. “Oh, well,” Greg stammered, rubbing his neck. “Don't worry about that. It's fine. I know that...well, you'd lost your memories, things got emotional. It happens. Not your fault.”

“I don't just mean that,” Pearl said in a rush, as if she was trying to get it all out as quickly as possible. Her cheeks had turned pale blue. “I mean before, as well. The first time around. And before that, also. I wasn't very- well, I could have treated you better.”

“I- what? Why are you saying this?”

Those weren't the words Greg had intended to say. He'd been raised, after all, to always accept an apology when given it. But he was so flabbergasted that his mouth moved without any thought for what was polite. He'd grown to care for Pearl, he really had, despite how hard she could make it, and sometimes he liked to think that she'd come to care for him as well, in her own way- but he'd never actually expected an apology from her.

She was looking away again. “Getting the memories back...It was like living them all over again. They feel very- fresh. It gives you a new perspective.” Pearl looked as though she was choking. “I
can see now that I wasn't always fair, to you. And I'm sorry.”

And there was only really one response he could give to that.

“It's okay, Pearl,” Greg said, putting a hand on her shoulder. She didn't shrink away from the physical contact. “I know how hard it all was for you. And thanks.”

Pearl looked at him, her eyes suddenly very bright. She shook her head. “I can see why Rose loved you so much.”

There was a lot more they could have said, but neither were quite sure how to say it. Greg withdrew his hand. They stood in silence until Steven returned, carrying brown bags filled with fry bits. The three of them walked back to the Temple together, Steven carrying the conversation for them all. The air seemed to grow lighter with him around, and Greg again nearly felt himself swallowed in relief, knowing that the boy and his family was safe.

As they made it up the sandy hill, Greg noticed a couple of birds perched on the railings of the deck. He quickly realized that one of those birds wasn't a bird at all- seagulls didn't ordinary come in purple, after all. It took him a little bit longer to acknowledge the oddly pinkish hue to the massive bird sitting next to Amethyst; he'd only ever seen Garnet shape-shift a handful of times. He was fairly certain that she was supposed to be an albatross. She was, somehow, still wearing her sunglasses.

Steven ran up to greet the two other Gems, Amethyst swooping down to brush his hair with her claws. (Seagulls, of course, didn't actually have claws, but Amethyst seemingly hadn't gotten the memo.)

“What's all this about?” Pearl asked Garnet once they'd reached the deck as well.

“Amethyst is going to take me where she last saw Malachite,” the tall Gem explained after nodding a greeting at Greg. “It's probable that she's moved on by now, but it's still the best lead we've had yet.”

Amethyst, who'd been making a show of settling down on Steven's head, puffed out her chest feathers with poorly disguised pride.

“Should I come too?” wondered Pearl, wringing her hands. She made a meaningful glance in Steven's direction.

“No, this is purely a scouting mission,” Garnet said. “You can stay here.”

(Was Greg imagining it, or did Pearl seem relieved? Or perhaps thankful? He wouldn't be surprised; it sounded like she'd had quite the day. They all must have.)

The boy seemed to deflate a little. “You mean you guys are heading out on a mission? I was kind of hoping that...”

“Don't worry, Steven,” Garnet said, somehow managing to smile despite having a beak. “We'll be home soon.”

“Yeah, dude, we can all hang out then!” Amethyst said.

Stars seemed to glitter in the child's eyes. “Awesome! We can do a movie night! Oooh, oooh, I know! We can start right now!” He turned to Greg. “Dad, Dad, you haven't see 'The Crying Breakfast Friends' movie yet, have you?”

The frozen expression on Pearl's face made it very tempting to lie, but with that sheer earnestness in
his son's voice, he couldn't help but be honest. “Nope. Can't say I have.”

“Great, neither has Pearl! It'll be new for both of you! And when Amethyst and Garnet get back, we can all watch the sequel together!”

At their expressions Amethyst made a cackling laugh as she jumped off into the sky, who was soon followed by Garnet, who called down a quick 'have fun!' as they pair flew off towards the ocean. They moved with supernatural speed, and it was obvious that they would return quickly. The three of them watched the pair disappear over the horizon; then Steven shepherded him and Pearl into the house to start making popcorn.

Yes, it was new, for all of them. But thankfully, after nearly eleven years, it wasn't that new. They had some practice, hey had some idea of what they were doing- and even if they didn't, at least they all had each other.

Chapter End Notes

And so we come to the end.

I'd like to extend a HUGE thank you to everyone who's been so supportive of this story. People have been so enthusiastic, thoughtful and helpful- I haven't had this much fun writing in a long time, and a big part of that is because of you. The Steven Universe fandom is really one of the most positive ones out there, and I look forward to writing more for it. <3

End Notes

Little plot bunny that couldn't go away, so eventually I just broke down and wrote it. I haven't had this beta'd or anything, but I still hope you all enjoy it. :D

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!